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12-PAGE TYRE SPECIAL!

WHAT TO BUY AND WHY P86

Unlock The Secrets Of Cycling's Super Seniors P.70

The SA Coach Behind The World's Top Team P.46

EXPERT OPINION

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SUIKERBOSRAND Discover Gauteng's Roadie Paradise P.42

RAISING THE BAR

HOW CYCLE TOUR CHAMP **TYLER LANGE** IS FORGING HIS OWN PATH P.38

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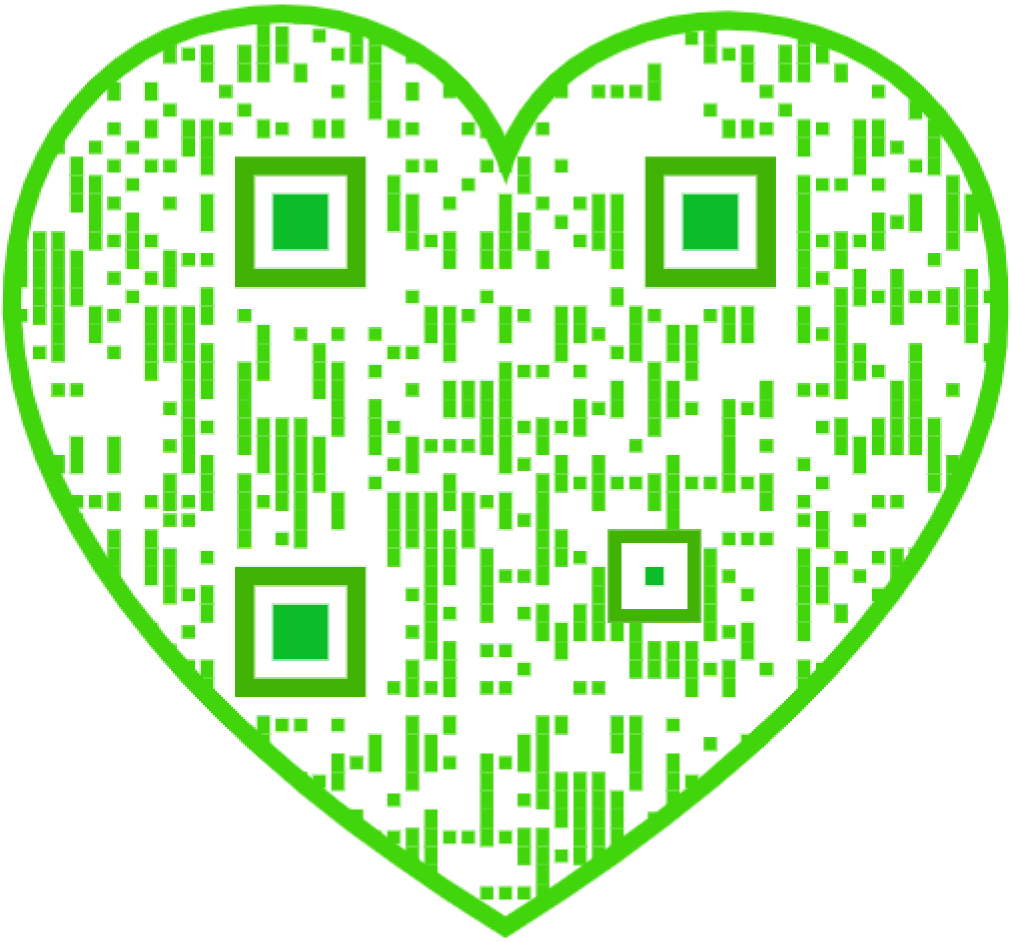

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Everything you need to know about tyres for road, gravel and mountain biking.

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Bicycling
RAISING THE BAR

COVER PHOTO
Mike Finch
Tyler Lange at the DSV SHIFT Academy in Paarl, which was co-founded by his dad Malcolm.

Images: Sprint Cycling Academy / UAE Team Emirates (Pogačar); Mike Finch (Tyler Lange)

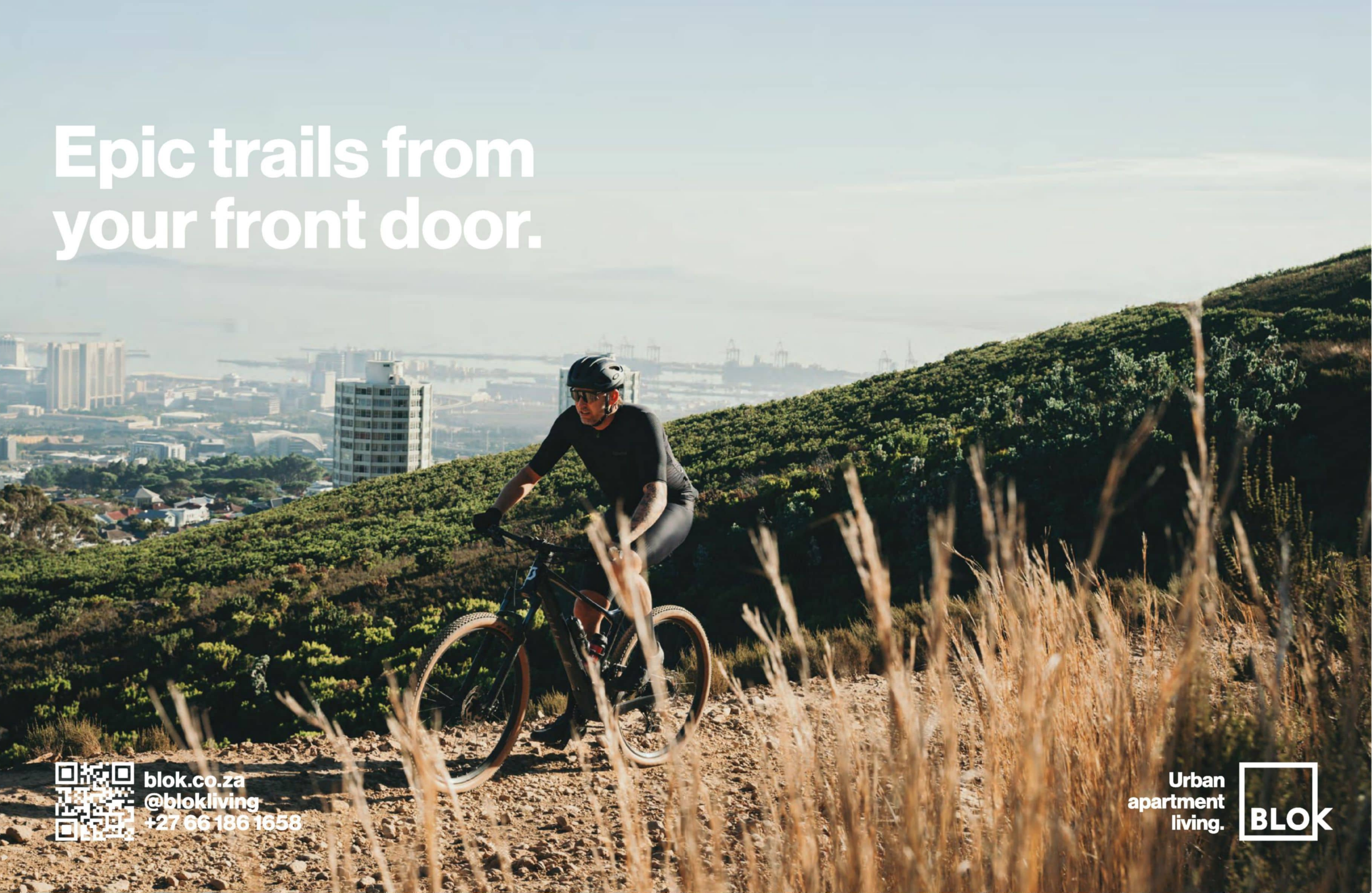
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Image: Trevor Raab

What's your best puncture repair tip?

*"My best tip is **not to get punctures** in the first place! Invest in a tubeless set-up, check your tyre pressure before each ride, and top up your sealant regularly."*
– JON MINSTER, EDITOR

*"Removing and reseating a tyre is never easy. But to make the tyre 'smaller', make sure **the bead on either side is pushed towards the centre** of the rim. This ensures it has a little more give when you need to lever it on or off."*
– MIKE FINCH, PUBLISHER

*"When all else fails and not even the bacon strips will help to seal a puncture, **make sure there's a cold beer waiting at the trailhead**. It's your only consolation after you have to walk back."*
– MARK ARENDSE, SENIOR DESIGNER

*"Always have your tyre plug device in an **easily accessible** place, loaded and ready to go…"*
– PAUL GODDARD, AD GUY

*"If you don't have a plug, **folding up a small piece of material** like a banknote or energy bar wrapper can block the puncture enough to get you to the next stop."*
– KIRSTEN CURTIS, ONLINE

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THE MORE YOU KNOW…

I WAS IN THE QUEUE OUTSIDE the porta-showers, talking to a guy about tyres.

Both of us were covered head to toe in mud: we'd just finished day two of the Grabouw Weekend Warrior with our kids, and the trails had been wet and wild after a night of heavy rain. As we shivered in the drizzle, clutching our towels and shower gel and waiting for one of the PVC enclosures to open, we reminisced about how we would never have been able to do this event in the 1990s, when *we* were kids.

The friction-shift 3x6 drivetrain on my steel Haro Escape wouldn't have lasted a kilometre in those conditions, and my bike's narrow knobblies – with tubes – would have punctured off the start line.

Instead, thanks to the modern miracles of tyre sealant, double-compound rubber and clutch derailleurs, my son Elliot (12) and I managed to finish the 40km route with smiles on our mud-caked faces.

Riding that race made me appreciate yet again what we simply assume our bikes can handle. Weekend after weekend, we just jump on and head out, expecting our tyres to hold air, our suspension to soak up the bumps, our dropper posts to rise and fall, our frames not to bend or crack, our bearings not to seize and our gears to shift crisply, regardless of the gunk we ride through.

It's actually amazing, if you stop and think about it.

This issue, we give you all the ammo you need to go tyre shopping (**p86**). It's not the most glamorous part of cycling, but the right rubber can completely change the way your bike behaves. Good tyres can also almost eliminate punctures; and yes, they will make you faster.

We also take a deep, deep dive into the latest pro trend – short cranks (**p80**). Again, this is something you might never have considered before; but once you understand the benefits, it might be something you want to try. All I can say is that I was *very* grateful for my 160mm cranks at Weekend Warrior – they allowed me to pedal over rocks without slamming into them, something I struggled with constantly when I was riding 175mm cranks.

Albert Einstein apparently said, "The more I learn, the more I realise how much I don't know." That's how I feel about cycling. I'm constantly amazed by the advances in all facets of our sport that seem to make the whole experience better and better – from basic gear like tyres and cranks to the absolute upper echelons of the pro peloton, where scientists like Dr Jeroen Swart still have no idea about the real limits of human endurance. (See our interview with Swart on **p46**.)

None of these advances are trying to replace the original sense of joy that comes with pedalling a bike – a feeling that hasn't changed since the invention of the velocipede; they're just making it better, easier, and accessible to more people. Because of our amazing gear, my son now has a muddy memory that will last a lifetime.

Thanks, bikes. As always.

Jon Minster

Image: Trevor Ransome

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ROUBAIX ROYALTY

All eyes were on Tadej Pogačar at this year's Paris-Roubaix – it was the first time a defending Tour de France champion had raced the 'Hell of the North' since Greg LeMond in 1991 – but Dutch superstar Mathieu van der Poel proved too strong on the day. With a total distance of 259.2km (and a bone-jarring 55.3km of that on cobbles), at 50km remaining the peloton had been whittled down to Pogačar and Van der Poel at the head of the field. But at 38km, Pog ran wide on a corner and crashed, allowing Van der Poel to build a 20-second gap – and extend it – to win his third straight Roubaix title.

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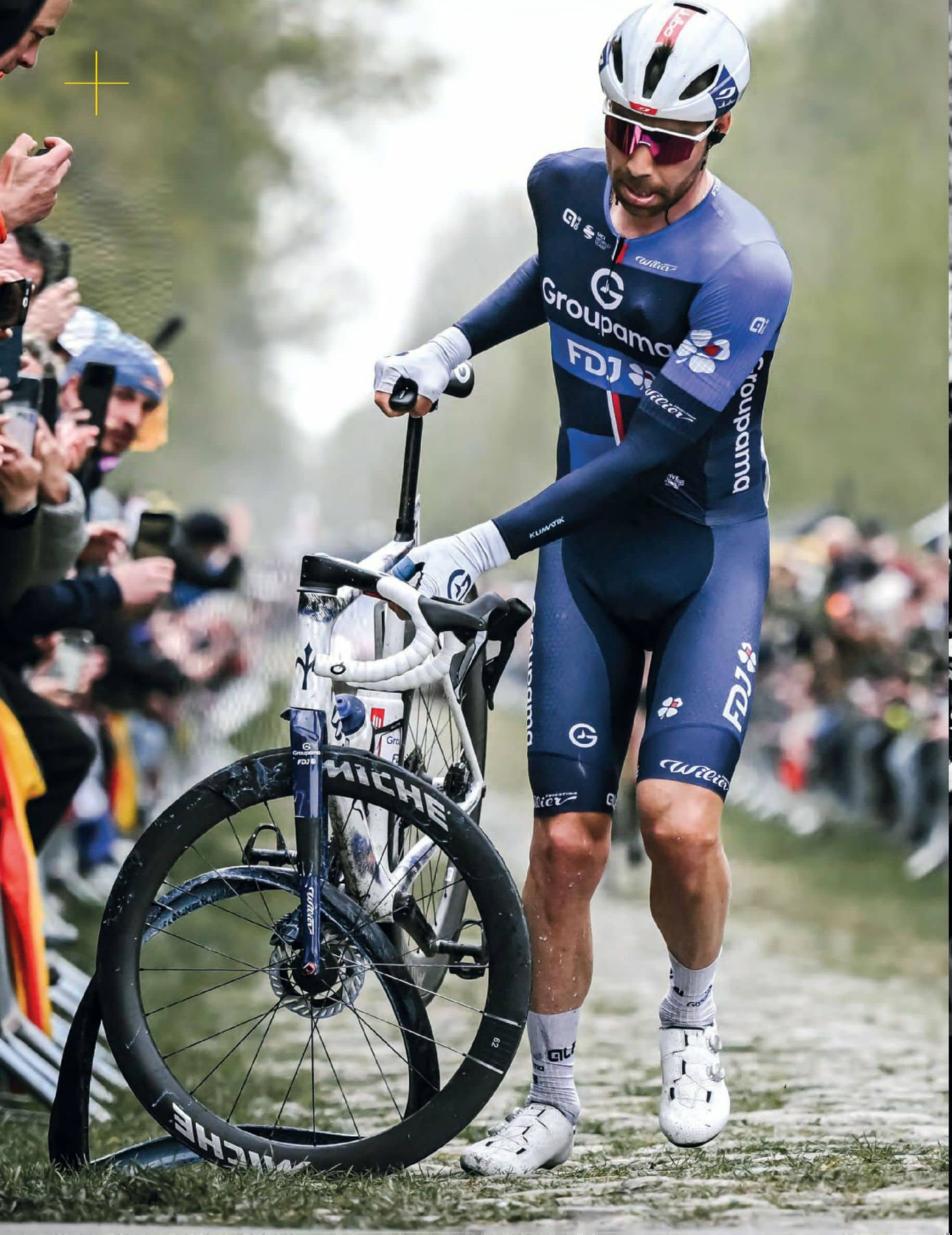

WHERE DREAMS ARE DASHED

The Forest of Arenberg at Paris-Roubaix is the most famous cobbled section of the race. It arrives with 95km to go, and its 2 300 hard metres are littered with stones that can destroy a rim – and a body – in an instant. Arenberg is where the lead group is quickly reduced to the main contenders. French rider Clément Russo learnt that the hard way…

ASO/PAULINE BALLET

COBBLED CAULDRON

World champion Tadej Pogačar makes his way up the fabled Oude Kwaremont climb on his way to winning the 109th edition of the Tour of Flanders. The 269km race attracted the biggest names in world cycling, but it was the Slovenian who triumphed – his sustained attacks eventually saw him pull away from Mathieu van der Poel with 15km remaining. Pogačar and Van der Poel are now equal on monument victories with eight each, after the Dutchman's win at Paris-Roubaix.

DARIO BELINGHERI/
GETTY IMAGES

HEAD IN THE CLOUDS
The 2025 Absa Cape Epic took riders from the dusty flatlands into spectacular mountains where the peaks dwarfed the competitors. If anyone saw a hobbit, no one was telling.

DOM BARNARDT/
ABSA CAPE EPIC

ROCKY HORROR

The opening two rounds of the 2025 UCI Mountain Bike World Series took place in Araxá, Brazil, and delivered a tough and technical challenge along a course lined with loud, passionate spectators. In the U23 category, it was reigning European champ Finn Treudler, from Cube Factory Racing, who rollicked his way to back-to-back victories.

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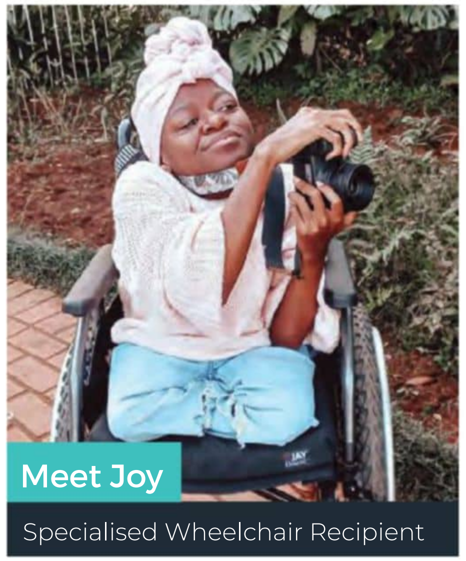
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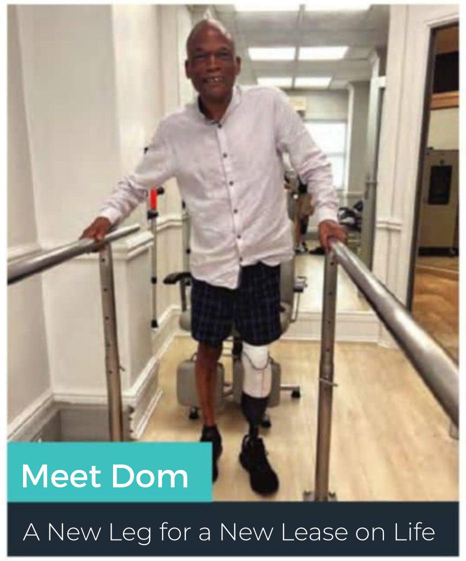
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GADGET OF THE MONTH

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■ Small enough to fit into the back pocket of your cycling jersey or even a saddle bag, this nifty little device is equivalent to three and a half 25g bombs and can fill four MTB tyres and five road tyres with a single charge. The pressure gauge is a great way to check your tyre pressure more accurately, and the little motor – although a little noisy for early-morning inflations indoors! – makes short work of adding a bar or two once you're on the pavement outside. Now you can finally get rid of that 10-year-old mini pump! – *Mike Finch*

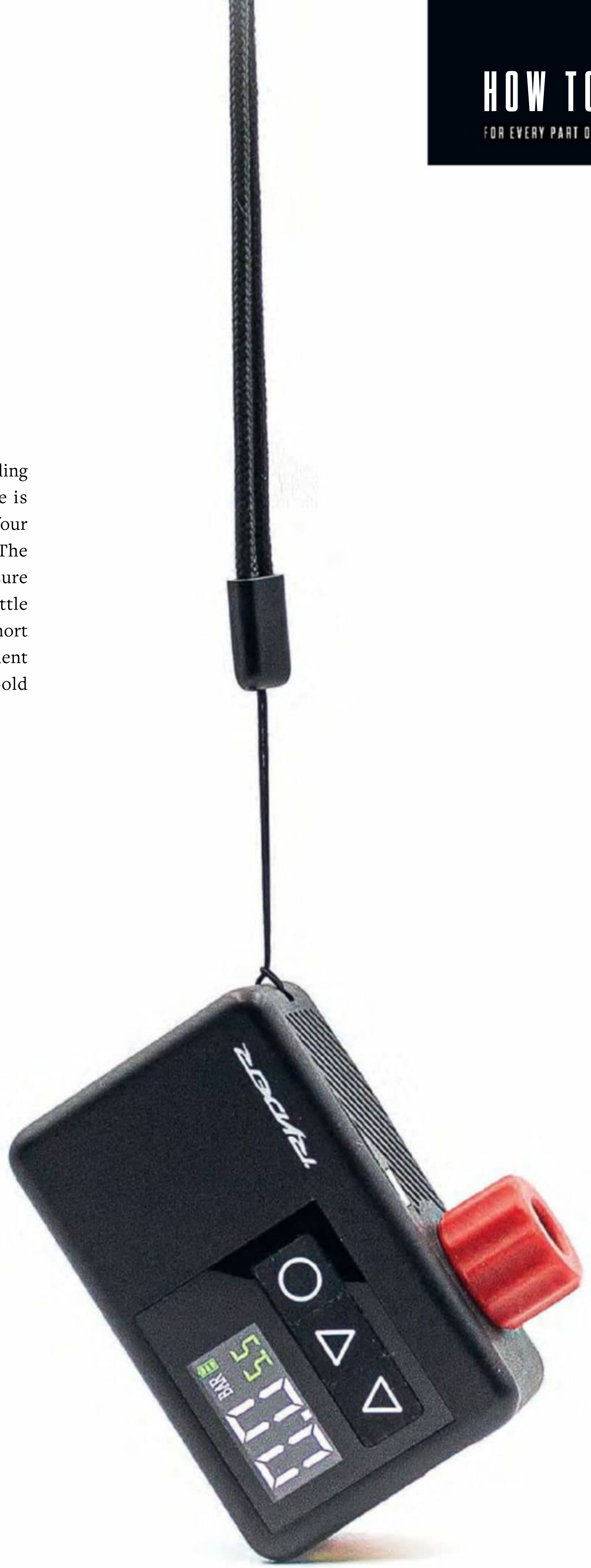

PHOTO: MIKE FINCH

CYCLING MYTH #32:

IT'S TOTALLY FINE TO HANG OUT IN YOUR KIT AFTER A RIDE

NOPE, NOPE, NOPE.

HERE'S THE DEAL: DURING A RIDE, your nether regions are rubbing against your shorts; you're sweating; and depending on the type of ride, you may be adding water, mud or dust into the mix. Perching on the saddle and pedalling causes friction between your skin and your shorts – even if your shorts and saddle are perfect for you. This means you're getting tiny little microtears in your skin, while also sweating and creating a warm, damp environment for bacteria to proliferate.

What could go wrong?

When you finish a ride, getting clean and dry 'down there' is key to avoiding saddle sores, rashes and other fun bacterial/fungal situations. We're not judging if you hang out with friends for a few minutes after the ride in your kit; but if you're planning a post-ride lunch or hopping onto a work call immediately after, it's time to switch to clean clothes. In other words, shed that chamois as soon as you can.

At a trailhead? Take 10 seconds and drop trou (without flashing the parking lot) rather than getting in your car and driving home sitting in your sweaty chamois. – *Molly Hurford*

WORD'AGE

ECHELON

An echelon is a tactical formation used to gain a drafting advantage in strong crosswinds. It's a diagonal line of riders, with each rider slightly offset to the side of the rider in front, thereby maximising protection from the wind. When you see echelons forming on a flat stage, you know there's trouble – if the main contenders aren't in the front bunch, there's a good chance they'll be dropped!

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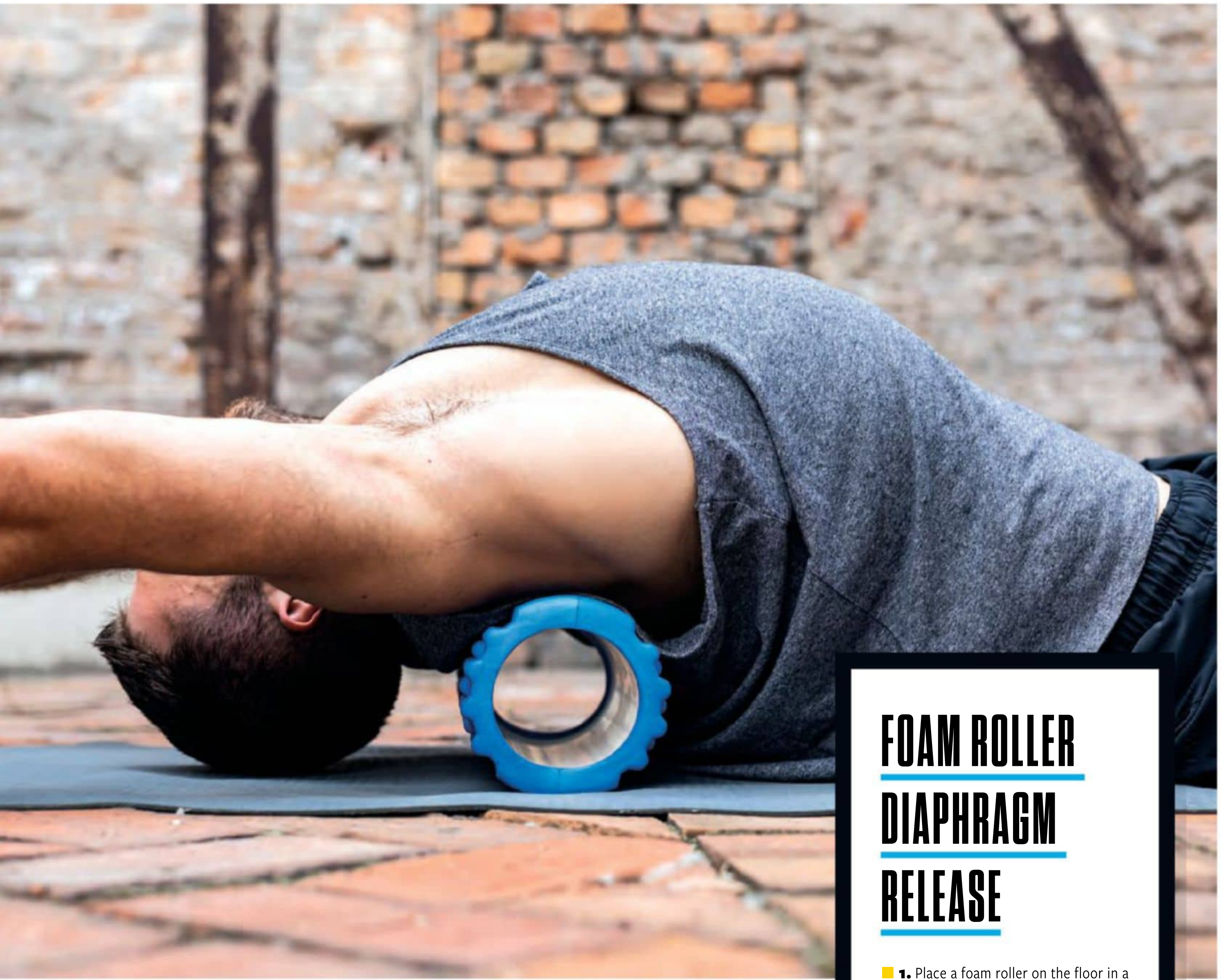


Getty Images

ANNND... BREATHE

DON'T NEGLECT YOUR DIAPHRAGM.

IF WE ASKED YOU WHAT the most important muscle is for stronger cycling, the quads, hamstrings, or even the calves might be what come to mind. After all, your legs do a significant share of the labour through every pedal stroke.

But what if we told you your legs shouldn't be getting all the glory? One of the most critical muscles for any cyclist is one that most of us never even think about, let alone train.

The diaphragm is a dome-shaped muscle that sits below the lungs, and it's our primary respiratory muscle. When the diaphragm activates as we inhale, the dome flattens and descends, expanding the rib cage and chest cavity and allowing the lungs to expand and fill with air. As we exhale, the diaphragm returns to the dome shape, contracting the rib cage and deflating our lungs.

This happens thousands of times a day, which is why it's essential to optimise the action. To do that, you need some diaphragm release. – *Natascha Grief*

FOAM ROLLER DIAPHRAGM RELEASE

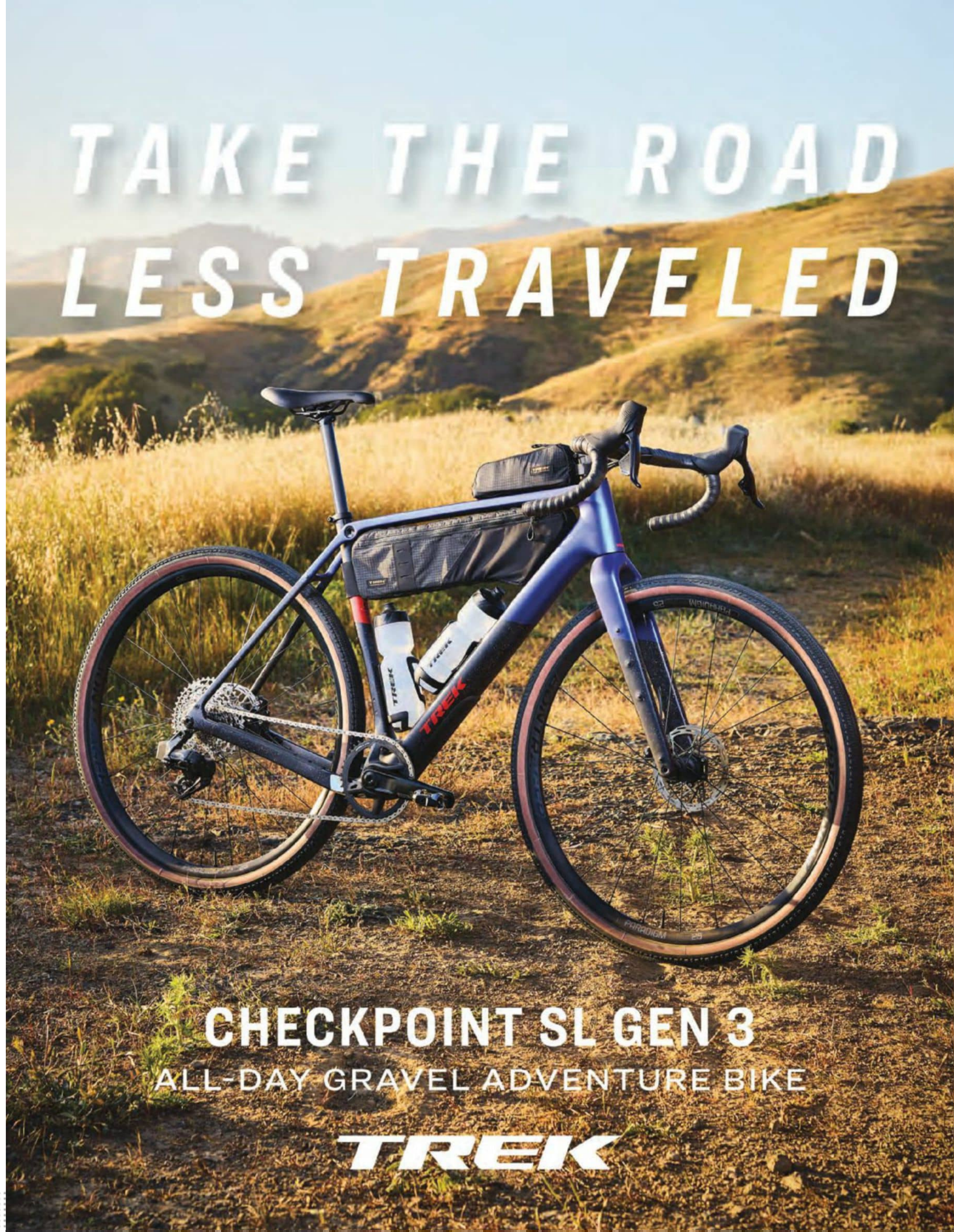
1. Place a foam roller on the floor in a horizontal position.

2. Lie face up on the foam roller, positioning it just below the lower tip of the shoulder blades. Bend both knees and place feet flat on the floor, or keep them extended, whichever is more comfortable.

3. Interlace hands behind the head and inhale deeply while extending back over the roller until your head rests on the floor.

4. Optional: Inhale and curl the head and shoulders back up as though doing a crunch. Sync your inhales and exhales with the movement during this release.

5. Repeat several times, until you feel a release in your diaphragm and back.



WHAT'S LURKING IN YOUR BOTTLE?

HOW TO CLEAN THEM – PROPERLY.

STICKY-SWEET SPORTS DRINKS and hydration tablets can turn your cycling water bottles into incubators for bacteria and mould that will linger longer with every ride. At best, your drink will begin to taste terrible and discourage you from hydrating enough on your ride; at worst, you may experience an upset stomach or nausea, or even an allergic reaction to the mould!

To learn more about how to clean a water bottle, we sat down with Ryan Jones, director of bottle development and operations at Specialized, and Seth Beiden, former marketing manager at CamelBak. Here are their expert tips for keeping your bottles fresh, clean, and in good shape for years of use.

HOW TO CLEAN A WATER BOTTLE

You should wash your bottle after every ride, as you would a normal drinking glass. According to Beiden, even if you only drink water, you're still leaving sweat (and possibly bits of whatever you're eating) on the lid as you ride and drink. At the very least, rinse your used bottle out.

Also, it's essential to know when to dispose of your water bottle. Despite all our best intentions, sometimes a bottle isn't cleaned frequently or thoroughly enough, and mould grows inside. Jones suggests you visually inspect your bottle's interior. If you can't remove all mould relatively easily with warm, soapy water and a brush, it's time to dispose of the bottle sustainably.

- **Wash by hand.** According to Jones, the best way to clean bottles after rides is to rinse them by hand with warm water and soap. Any general, all-purpose liquid soap will do the job.
- **Skip the dishwasher.** Sure, it's easier to toss your bottles into the dishwasher, but the water temperature in most dishwashers is near boiling. Such heat commonly deforms many types of plastic goods and kitchen utensils, and it can degrade your bottles more quickly over time.
- **Use a brush.** A simple, long-handled bottle brush, available at most department or kitchen stores, will help you clean deep inside large bottles or those with narrow openings. Scrubbing cleans sticky residues more easily and thoroughly, and better removes mould, than rinsing alone.
- **Skip harsh cleaners.** If you have to resort to harsh cleaners, it's probably time to toss the bottle into the recycling bin. Jones notes that bleach in particular is a harsh chemical you may want to avoid putting into your bottle; if you don't rinse enough, the bleach could contaminate your water the next time you fill it.
- **Cleaning tabs.** It's also worth trying cleaning tablets designed specifically for cleaning water bottles and hydration bladders, especially for bottles that seem almost too far gone.
- **Don't forget the top.** When you drink, fluid also flows through the bottle's top, so remember to take care of that too. Beiden suggests that you squeeze some soapy water through each bottle top. Some bottle designs nowadays have tops that can be disassembled to facilitate easier cleaning of every nook and cranny.
- **Let your bottle dry out.** Once your bottle is totally clean – and fully rinsed out, because mould tastes bad, but so does soap – it's important to let it dry out completely before storing it away, especially if you store it with the top on. Letting a wet bottle sit will just allow the bacteria to grow all over again.

– Molly Hurford **B**

Image: Mike Finch

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▶▶ IS THERE SUCH A THING AS A 'BEST' BIKE?

BY **TARA SEPLAVY**

WHEN SOMEONE LEARNS that I'm an editor at *Bicycling*, they often ask, "So, what's the best bike?" Simply answering, "There's no best bike," might sound like a lame response, but it actually opens the door to more questions and discussion.

The best bike generally isn't the lightest, nor is it the fastest. It probably didn't carry a professional to Tour de France glory or a World Championship rainbow jersey. And quite often, it's far from the most expensive machine on the market.

Many cyclists over-obsess about buying the 'best' bicycle; it seems to be in our DNA. When researching a new bike purchase, we pore over geometry charts and dissect the nuances of manufacturers' specifications. We read reviews, dive down internet rabbit holes, and talk to other cyclists to winnow out or justify potential options.

And those options for great bikes are seemingly endless – it's a bottomless bidon of choice across dozens of riding categories, subcategories and niches. If you're shopping for a gravel bike, for example, you need to decide if you want a racey gravel bike, or one designed for endurance. SRAM or Shimano? And what about suspension – or even an e-bike?

The razor-thin differences between brands (and sometimes even within a company's product line) can make selecting a new bike challenging for many riders. The choices can mentally paralyse you. This sheer overabundance can cause FOBO – fear of a better option – when you simply cannot decide because you're afraid another, even better, option awaits.

You may have experienced it: you're almost set to lay down cash on Brand X, when photos are leaked of a new, top-secret bike from Brand Y. Then you wait for that new bike's release, only for Brand Z to announce *its* latest model! Instead of having a great time riding a new bike on the trail or the road, you're stuck with your old bike that now brings you no joy – or worse, you don't ride at all.

If you bought that bike from Brand X and now fear buyer's remorse, I also get it; it's a real emotion, and a bike can be a big investment. But I'm here to assure you that it's more than likely you made a solid choice. It's a golden age of bicycle performance. Bikes are very, very good right now.

While appearance is always subjective, from a strictly functional standpoint, purchasing an absolutely amazing bike is much easier than buying a certified stinker. Almost without exception, new bicycles (regardless of price, category and where they're sold) operate better than ever. While some may have particular service needs or quirks, virtually all new bikes are capable and reliable.

> "FROM A STRICTLY FUNCTIONAL STANDPOINT, PURCHASING AN ABSOLUTELY AMAZING BIKE IS MUCH EASIER THAN BUYING A CERTIFIED STINKER."

And bicycle companies generally have sizing and geometry pretty dialled. If you require a more precise fit, or if you have particular needs or preferences, there are plenty of options for component changes. Recently launched bikes ride more smoothly and confidently than their predecessors. Drivetrains shift almost flawlessly, and brakes have more power and modulation than ever.

Sure, a R200k race bike with Shimano Dura-Ace will ride faster on the road, shift more precisely, and stop quicker than a R15k gravel bike with Shimano Claris. That said, a race bike with Dura-Ace rides very similarly to a race bike with SRAM Red... Many riders can't distinguish a ride-quality difference between comparably-equipped bikes, and certainly not enough to keep them from enjoying the bike.

When I worked in bike shops or at events for brands, riders often inquired about which bike to purchase. Usually, I'd ask them, "Where do you want to ride?" or "What issue with your current bike do you need to resolve?" These questions help establish a cyclist's riding intent and narrow the choices.

But now, when friends or readers ask me what bike to buy, I ask instead, "What will make you ride *more*?" or "What do you need to ride *happier*?"

Think back to the bicycle that got you hooked on riding. I'm willing to bet it didn't threaten the UCI's minimum weight regulation, and it probably wasn't constructed from carbon fibre or aero-optimised in a wind tunnel.

But I bet that bike made you happy. Otherwise, you wouldn't have fallen in love with cycling. That detail alone made it good enough to qualify as a great bike.

So, yes, the 'best' bike actually does exist; and you might already own it. Whichever bicycle gets you stoked to ride is the best bike.

Rather than sweating the nuances of specification and millimetre differences of geometry, look for characteristics that will bring you joy. If a bike with a sparkly paint job or fenders and lights makes you smile and ride more, it's the best bike for you. If someone else rides more and is happier thanks to an aero race bike with skinny tyres, or an electric bike with fat tyres, that's the best bike for them. ***B***

***Tara Seplavy,** deputy editor of Bicycling US, sold the best bike she ever owned: a blue Iron Horse Sunday downhill bike with the serial number SKA-001. If you have it, she wants to buy it back.*

I'VE BEEN A GEAR EDITOR FOR 30 YEARS. HERE'S WHAT'S WORTH YOUR MONEY – AND WHAT ISN'T.

BY **MATT PHILLIPS**

THE STUFF I SPLURGE ON

BIKE FIT → I spend hours and hours on a bike, and I want every minute to be as comfortable and fun as possible. For a long time, I used the fit I developed by listening to my body, and that worked okay; but it always seemed like there was more potential than I could find on my own.

A professional fit unlocked that potential. The fitter made a series of adjustments that led to noticeably better performance and comfort. My new, better fit was especially noticeable on long rides and after unbroken blocks of riding.

But bike fits aren't one-and-done. Ten years after getting my last fit, I went through a new fit consultation; which, like last time, resulted in a handful of tweaks that have already paid dividends.

MAINTENANCE TIME AND TOOLS → I pay attention to my bikes as I ride, listening for new or strange noises and noticing if the bike starts to feel or handle differently – indications that something needs attention.

By splurging on maintenance time, I usually find and address issues before they become a problem on a ride, so my bikes are always running fast, smooth and quiet; they last a long time, and I don't encounter nagging issues.

I recommend investing in good tools, especially a torque wrench. High-quality instruments last longer and are less likely to damage delicate parts.

TYRES → High-performance tyres are magical. At the right pressure, they make your bike faster and smoother, and they grip better, so you can ride more comfortably and confidently.

Considering they're one of the cheapest pieces of cycling hardware, good tyres have the greatest ratio of performance gained per rand spent. So, yeah, I'll happily spend nearly a thousand bucks per tyre for the Pirelli P Zero Race TLR RS, or the Vittoria Mazza Enduro. [*Our gear feature later in the mag gets stuck into this subject in more detail – Ed.*]

GOOD BEARINGS → The thing about bearings is that they get worked hard every ride, which is why they're the bike's most maintenance-intensive parts – after chains, cogs and rings. And they're buried where it takes work to reach them for service.

That's why I'll pay more for good bottom brackets, headsets and hub bearings (and pivot bearings on a mountain bike). And I'll make sure the frame surfaces where the bearings reside are properly prepared.

Good doesn't mean spending crazy money for ceramic bearings that advertise 'forever' spins. But it might mean investing in Chris King stuff, for example. Enduro MaxHit products are also legendary. The money and effort spent on installing good bearings will pay off in the future.

◄ **WHEN MEN WORE SHORTS AND BIKES WERE STEEL.** SENIOR TEST EDITOR MATT PHILLIPS HAS BEEN SENDING IT SINCE THE 1990S.

Matt Phillips

River to Brainards North from Pburg
00:54
W 3 SEC
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▲ **SIMPLE SIMPLY WORKS.** BEFORE YOU SPLURGE ON THE LATEST, GREATEST (AND BIGGEST) BIKE COMPUTER, CONSIDER WHETHER YOU REALLY NEED ALL THE FEATURES. THIS WAHOO ELEMNT BOLT COSTS LESS THAN R5K AND OFFERS EVERYTHING MOST RIDERS NEED.

Trevor Raab

WHEELS → Forget the latest drivetrains and 'upgrades' like oversized pulley wheel systems: if you want a bike to feel and perform better, invest in a great wheelset (wrapped with great tyres, of course).

I've found that putting a light and stiff wheelset on a lower-tier frame results in a better overall package than the reverse. And you don't need to spend R100k-plus on something ridiculous like a set of Lightweight Obermayer Evos; there are plenty of sub-R20k wheelsets that kick ass – including Lyne, Hunt, Bontrager and others.

For my mountain bikes – except maybe an XC race bike, where weight is a top concern – I prefer the feel of a good aluminium wheelset like the RaceFace Turbine or the DT Swiss XM 1700 to that of a more expensive carbon wheel.

BIB SHORTS → I don't shop for cycling shorts by price; I focus on fit and comfort. My favourites are often a brand's mid- and lower-tier models, like CIOVITA's Corsa 2.0, Enjoy's ProXision and RH77's RACE 7.7. Admittedly, some of these are still expensive (look out for sales), but one pair of great bibs is worth more than a hundred pairs of ill-fitting and poorly designed shorts you bought just because they were cheap.

COLD- AND WET-WEATHER GEAR → When it comes to gear for inclement weather, investing in high-quality products makes a huge difference – potentially, between a great ride and a dangerous ride.

In this space, name-brand technologies like Polartec, Gore-Tex, Gore Windstopper and eVent are usually worth paying for. For insulation, I seek out products that use Polartec Alpha and PrimaLoft.

HELMETS → Try on as many different options as possible, and pay for the one that feels best. You're not going to regret paying an extra R2 000 for a lighter, better-ventilated and better-fitting helmet. And as with bib shorts, it's often the mid-priced stuff that impresses me the most.

So, while a R4 900 Specialized S-Works Prevail is a superb helmet, so is the brand's R2 900 Search. That said, if I tried on both and the Prevail felt better, I wouldn't hesitate to buy it. Put your comfort and safety first, not your wallet.

THE STUFF I SAVE ON

DRIVETRAIN → Unless all you care about is weight or flexing, there's no reason to buy a top-of-the-line drivetrain. The key technologies that influence performance are usually the same in a third-tier group as they are in a top-tier group. Skip the Shimano Dura-Ace Di2 or SRAM Red AXS and get the Shimano 105 Di2 or Ultegra Di2, or SRAM's Rival AXS or Force AXS. (Or – heaven forbid! – a mechanical set-up.)

While it's true that drivetrain brands introduce their newest features and designs in their top-tier groups – hood shape, brake revisions and a micro-adjusting front derailleur in SRAM's new Red AXS, for example – these things trickle down to the lower-priced groups eventually.

HIGH-END CARBON ROAD FRAME → While I'll always encourage people to spend as much money as they want on a custom frame from a small builder they love – like David Mercer – I don't feel the same about mass-produced carbon frames from mainstream brands.

I have two main reasons for this. For one, carbon frames, especially race-oriented frames, tend to evolve so quickly that the latest/lightest/fastest/coolest can only claim to be so for a few months before it's supplanted. Second, when a company offers multiple tiers of carbon frame, the top-of-the-line is usually a lot more expensive but only fractionally lighter.

As I see it, the extra money brands charge for their premium frames is in no way justified by the extra performance they offer. And this is clearer than ever as brands like Elves and Winspace start to gain traction with frames that boast impressive performance but are half (or even less) the price of a top-end Trek Madone, Specialized Tarmac or Cannondale SuperSix Evo.

> THE EXTRA MONEY BRANDS CHARGE FOR THEIR PREMIUM FRAMES IS IN NO WAY JUSTIFIED BY THE EXTRA PERFORMANCE THEY OFFER.

PEDALS → There's no real reason to buy the top-of-the-line pedal in a brand's range. You'll get the same performance – because they use the same cleat – from a cheaper pedal from Shimano, Look, Time, Crank Brothers or Speedplay.

Plus, many brands use a titanium axle on their most expensive pedal, which is less stiff than a steel axle and often has a lower rider weight limit.

CYCLING COMPUTER → Cycling computers have been good for a long time, and their main features haven't changed in years. Still, to convince you to buy something new and expensive, brands add fancy-sounding features that often turn out to be not as useful as promised, helpful only to small numbers of people, or needed only in uncommon circumstances.

For daily use, I need a computer that connects to GPS and a few sensors, displays the few metrics I want to see while I ride – time, elevation and power-related stuff – and records my ride data so I can view it later. I never use a computer's workout tools (I find workouts more practical to do indoors on Zwift, for example). And I hardly use the navigation tools; when I do, the most I usually need is 'turn left' or 'turn right'.

I don't need seven thousand ride or bike profiles; I don't need my computer to respond to a WhatsApp message; I don't need it to tell me I'm riding into a headwind; and so on. The only newer feature I might want is compatibility with a radar for increased safety, which is just a sensor profile and a data field anyway.

Most of what the R10k to R15k computers offer is simply not useful or needed. The GPS cycling computers with all the tools I need (and way more) for my everyday rides include the Garmin Edge 130 Plus (about R4 500) and Wahoo ELEMNT Bolt (about R4 600). ***B***

Senior Test Editor Matt Phillips has ridden thousands of bikes and used countless pieces of equipment during his career – everything from mainstream gear to weird stuff that didn't actually work. No matter how cheap or unfathomably expensive, all of it has taught him lessons about what matters.

THE RAT MIKE FINCH'S SINGLE-SPEED ORBEA WITH MISMATCHED WHEELS AND DOWN-TUBE DECORATION BY HOLLY, MIKE'S DAUGHTER.

Photograph by Mike Finch

WHY EVERYONE SHOULD BE SINGLE

BY **MIKE FINCH**

THIS IS MY RAT BIKE. I even refer to it as that under my 'Equipment' tab on Strava.

It's an aluminium Orbea 'aero' frame from an unknown era that was transformed from bike-room junk into a rideable single-speed, thanks to some clever modification by Nils Hansen at Woodstock Cycleworks in Cape Town. The wheels that now do duty on The Rat were also gathering dust in a garage, so the only components I needed were brakes and levers.

The space on the side of the downtube, usually reserved for a brand name, was decorated by my seven-year-old daughter before the 2023 Cape Town Cycle Tour. Those felt stickers have remained intact ever since. I was able to ride the entire Cycle Tour on it that year – largely due to the social pace of my group, which allowed me to struggle up hills while still keeping in touch. I pedalled like a frenzied egg-beater on the flats and downhills, and had to zigzag up Chappies and Suikerbossie just to maintain a speed fast enough to avoid falling over.

But I finished the Cycle Tour, and I was elated.

COMMITMENT

It all started when I casually suggested to another SS owner that we tackle the great race on our single-speeds. He agreed immediately, so I had to commit. But privately, I seriously doubted whether it was feasible, and I anticipated walking up all the hills and riding a very solitary race.

It turned out to be more achievable than I'd thought. And since then, I've endeavoured to ride the bike weekly – primarily on our Tuesday ride, which admittedly is pancake-flat.

There's little doubt that the single gear significantly impacts my riding style. The power needed to ascend any incline means that every hill becomes a torque interval – a slow-cadence push on the pedals that not only engages every muscle fibre in my legs, but also builds strength.

> I PEDALLED LIKE A FRENZIED EGG-BEATER ON THE FLATS AND DOWNHILLS, AND HAD TO ZIGZAG UP CHAPPIES AND SUIKERBOSSIE...

World-class cyclists regularly use torque intervals to build strength; such exercises compel you to pedal in close-to-perfect circles, as you seek to generate power during every phase of the pedal stroke. They assist in developing perfect pedalling form, which then translates to your pedalling when you return to your geared bike. A day or two after riding my SS, I feel distinctly more fluid and strong in my pedal stroke.

But it's not just about slow grinding. The minute the gradient goes neutral or negative, your legs start to spin. We all know that the ability to maintain a high cadence is one of the most crucial skills in cycling – on the road and in mountain-biking – and dealing with flats and descents in a single gear means having to focus on maintaining high turnover without bouncing off the saddle like a rodeo clown.

The late Tim Brink, who was the editor of this magazine before his passing last year, was a great advocate of the single-speed. He rode a one-gear mountain bike for years – up and down some of the biggest climbs in the Western Cape, and often on long, solo bike-packing missions.

PURITY

There's a purity to riding a single-speed bike. No gears equate to no fuss. Just ride; and find a way to engage your legs to conquer that hump, or glide down that -1% descent.

Famously, McGregor local Max Menzies has completed multiple Absa Cape Epics on a rigid single-speed, proving that anything is possible. His exploits might epitomise the extreme fringe of the genre, but Max thrives on the challenge and the low maintenance.

The single-speed life can take many forms. Commuting on a single-speed is immensely popular in most major cities around the world, as SS bikes are cheap, easy to maintain and can be securely locked to the nearest lamp-post. We may not yet have a single-speed commuting and courier culture in South Africa, but therein lies an opportunity and a challenge.

I will never part with my ratty single-speed. Riding it is exhilarating and challenging all at once, and reminds me of the simplicity that is the foundation of the sport we love...

Maybe it should be *your* next N+1. ***B***

By DAVID MOSELEY

BUM DEAL

THE ORIGINAL IDEA FOR THIS REGULAR COLUMN was to focus on cycling fashion and style. Maybe touch on a few trends. What are we riding? What are we wearing? What's in and what's out?

But yours truly being the sort that seldom does what he's told – unless it's by my granny, as she threatens to whack me with a slipper for not making the bed – I've veered off on various tangents over the past few issues in an effort to enlighten and entertain. (A bit like my mountain-bike descents, truth be told.)

I would rather tell you a story about my daughter's first successful A-frame attempt than delve into the inner workings of the latest lightweight power meter. And as far as style is concerned, all you need to know is that as long as you keep your sleeveless jersey in the cupboard (forever) and leave your secret socks in a secret hidey place (like… the bin), we're all good, right?

Oh, how wrong I was.

Riding the Cape Town Cycle Tour earlier this year has brought me back to the initial intentions of *The Spokesman* – to cast a discerning eye over cycling fashion.

Most of you are probably aware that over the last few years, we cyclists have come a long way in the fashion stakes – thanks in part to cycling apparel brands realising that not all riders want to look like a three-year-old's 'artwork' when leaving the house. ("Look, mommy! I made a rainbow porridge pea soup raspberry dogshit cake drawing for you!")

Events, too, have played their part, giving participants high-quality and occasionally rather chic souvenir jerseys. We all agree on calf-length socks (except for those 'tri' weirdos); and actually, as long as you're being unmistakably ironic, you can wear just about anything on a bike. (We're looking at you, the guy who still wears a Topsport helmet from 1984. I mean, you'll die if you crash, but you look flipping cool.)

And of course, no matter how well-dressed you are on the bike – and no matter how sexy you think you look at the start of a ride – all cyclists look hopelessly dorky when clanking around coffee shops in their cleats. That's just a fact.

But wouldn't you know it: some of our fellow riders just haven't got the message. Like one man in particular at this year's Cape Town Cycle Tour, who I had the (dis)pleasure of being stuck behind on the flat portions of the route through Blue Route and Muizenberg.

Stuck 'behind' is an apt pun, because – horror of horrors – this chap had committed the cardinal sin of suiting up in not just white bib shorts, but white bib shorts that must have been purchased during James Bond's George Lazenby era.

Naturally (or rather, unnaturally, surely) by the time I'd caught up to this crack cycling superstar, the sweat dripping down his back had moistened his bib shorts to a horribly objectionable state of translucence. Stuck between riders with nowhere to go and nowhere to hide, I stared deep into the a(rse)byss, and the a(rse)byss stared back. (I think it even winked at one stage.) I silently screamed into that moist little void, and the void went 'pffft' back.

Mercifully, a gap in the pack presented itself, and I was able to go full-gas past the Man in White (I never knew his name, although by then I was more intimately acquainted with him than his closest friends and family).

Months later, I can still see that dripping derriere when I close my eyes at night, as I curse the Cycle Tour organisers for not having stricter clothing requirements. And as I write letters in my head to every apparel manufacturer in the world, requesting that they burn their surplus stocks of white spandex. ***B***

Image: Canva

PARTNER CONTENT

FUEL • RECOVER • PERFORM

THE AVO ADVANTAGE

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SLOW AND STEADY WINS THE RACE

Avocados are rich in heart-healthy monounsaturated fats, which provide slow-release energy. These good fats help keep you fuelled for endurance sports such as cycling, assist with the absorption of some vitamins, and help protect your heart.

CRAMP LESS, RECOVER MORE

Every athlete knows that post-workout recovery is just as important as the training itself. Avocados contain potassium (double the amount found in a banana), which helps prevent cramps and supports muscle recovery. The anti-inflammatory properties of the avo also help reduce post-exercise soreness, to ensure you get back on the road or trail faster.

HAPPY GUT

A happy gut means a happy athlete. Avocados contain fibre and prebiotics to support digestive health, keeping your gut microbiome in tip-top shape. A well-balanced gut can improve nutrient absorption, and even support immune function – the key to avoiding those pesky winter colds and niggles that disrupt training.

So, whether you're making a pre-training green smoothie, spreading avo on your toast or adding it to a post-ride salad, this game-changing green food is a must-have for cyclists. Fuel smarter, recover faster, and keep your gut in the game with the power of avocados. Go on – just add an avo!

For further information and avo recipes, *visit avocado.co.za*, like us on Facebook @iloveavocadoSA and follow us on Instagram @iloveavossa

DAIRY-FREE AVO SMOOTHIE

Avos aren't just for salads and sandwiches. Add them to smoothies to make a super-creamy drink, like this vegan-friendly yoghurt substitute.

SERVES 1

Preparation time: 10 minutes

INGREDIENTS

1	avocado, chopped
1	banana, sliced
½ cup	chopped pineapple
1	handful baby spinach
¾ cup	orange juice + extra
1–2	squeeze(s) lemon juice

METHOD

Freeze the avo, banana and pineapple overnight in an airtight container. Blitz all the ingredients together until creamy. Thin out with extra orange juice, if preferred. Serve immediately. Tip: if you don't have time to freeze the fruit, blitz them fresh with a handful of ice cubes.

add an AVO
NURTURED IN SOUTH AFRICA

As told to **DAVID MOSELEY**

THE ALWAYS-ON INNOVATOR

KEVIN VERMAAK, FOUNDER OF THE CAPE EPIC AND GRAVEL BURN

FOR MOST SOUTH AFRICAN CYCLING AFICIONADOS, Kevin Vermaak needs no introduction.

But just in case you've forgotten, here's a refresher. He's the man who turned a crazy mountain-biking idea into the Absa Cape Epic – one of the world's greatest cycling events, and one that attracts the global elite to local shores where they choose to spend a week suffering under the African sun.

Lately, however, he's turned his attention away from XC machines to gravel bikes. His newest innovation is the Nedbank Gravel Burn, a seven-day gravel race that will take riders on a journey from Knysna to Shamwari Private Game Reserve via the Great Karoo.

"I enjoy thinking of new ideas, and solving the problems that inevitably arise," he says. "As an example: we needed water for one of the Gravel Burn overnight camps, so we sank a borehole and built a reservoir on the host farm – it's a win-win for the farmer and for the event."

Vermaak says that Gravel Burn isn't just a gravel clone of the Cape Epic. "We're going in a different direction – the focus will be on the rider experience, with well-equipped camps in remote areas. The spirit of gravel riding is all about adventure."

I take my coffee... in our offices at WeWork in Strand Street, Cape Town. Part of their offering worldwide is unlimited free coffee to all members, every day. I take full advantage! It's the first thing I do when I get there.

I'd love to go for a ride... with a family member on a tandem at the Cape Town Cycle Tour. I've done so with my wife before, and twice with my son – next year I plan to ride with my daughter. Riding the Cycle Tour with someone close to you is a great bonding experience.

The secret to happiness is... family, no question. But there are lots of other things that help. Challenging yourself creatively, good friends... and great coffee.

My greatest exhilaration... is probably when I occasionally get to go kite-surfing. It's such a thrill to ride a six-foot wave for a few seconds like a surfer, before powering up the kite again and heading out to catch the next wave.

I fear... The normal stuff, I guess; like making a terrible financial decision, or somehow ending up as a lonely old man. But mostly it's about not being able to do all the things that I love: spending time with my family, being creative in business, hanging out with friends, riding my bike...

A moment of pure clarity... happened on stage five of last year's Cape Epic, when I had a flash of inspiration and came up with the idea for Gravel Burn.

When I wake up... I wish I was still asleep! I'm a bit of an insomniac – I sometimes wake up at 3am, and my mind starts racing. Before I know it, I'm back at my laptop, wrestling with the challenges of the day. That might sound like workaholic behaviour to some people, but I promise I'd rather be getting a good eight hours of sleep!

I rage against... complacency, mediocrity and corruption in South Africa. This country has all the potential to be world class, but we seem intent on squandering that potential.

I wish... we could just get rid of corruption in South Africa overnight. **B**

Image: supplied

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As told to **MIKE FINCH**

MAKING HIS OWN HISTORY

TYLER LANGE [21], WINNER OF THE 2025 CAPE TOWN CYCLE TOUR

TYLER LANGE DOESN'T STRUGGLE WITH THE WEIGHT OF EXPECTATION.

As the son of Malcolm Lange, Tyler would be excused for choosing another path in life rather than that of a professional cyclist. Malcolm, now 52, has won everything there was to win in South African cycling: 403 victories, three national titles, three Cape Town Cycle Tours, etc. He rode in the Barcelona Olympics in 1992, and was regarded as the premier sprinter in South Africa for more than a decade.

So, when 21-year-old Tyler pulled off a remarkable come-from-behind sprint to win the 2025 Cape Town Cycle Tour in 2:25.48 – and break Robbie Hunter's 17-year-old course record in the process – every headline announcing the win drew comparisons between Tyler and his legendary dad.

We caught up with the Langes at the DSV Shift Academy in Paarl, which Malcolm runs to develop young talent in the Boland area.

What was it like growing up with a father who was probably the most successful rider of his generation?

TYLER: Most kids grow up with a dad who goes to work nine to five, and to them, that's normal. For me, it was normal for my dad to be out at 5am and then pick me up from school when he came back from training. So I really understood the training side from an early age.

THERE ARE ALWAYS THE QUESTIONS: 'ARE YOU GONNA BEAT YOUR DAD'S RECORDS? ARE YOU GONNA WIN AS MUCH?'

How have you managed to handle the pressure of living up to the Lange name?

T: I never thought of it as pressure. For me, I just did my own thing. But of course, there are always the questions: 'Are you gonna beat your dad's records? Are you gonna win as much?' We're two completely different people. But obviously… in South Africa, Lange's a big name in cycling. So, there's the good and the bad that comes from it.

Your dad has told us that he and your mom tried to discourage you from cycling seriously because of all that expectation, but it seems that you loved cycling from an early age?

T: Yeah, I've always loved riding bikes. Every holiday, I had to have a bike; and even if we went to watch my dad, I would come back and want to ride. It didn't matter what kind of bike it was, just as long as it was a bike.

MALCOLM: I remember where it all started. We lived in a small complex in Joburg when he was young, and we had a short driveway. He must have done thousands of kays just in that driveway, emulating finishes.

But it's fair to say that you probably learnt a lot about cycling just by virtue of being around your dad?

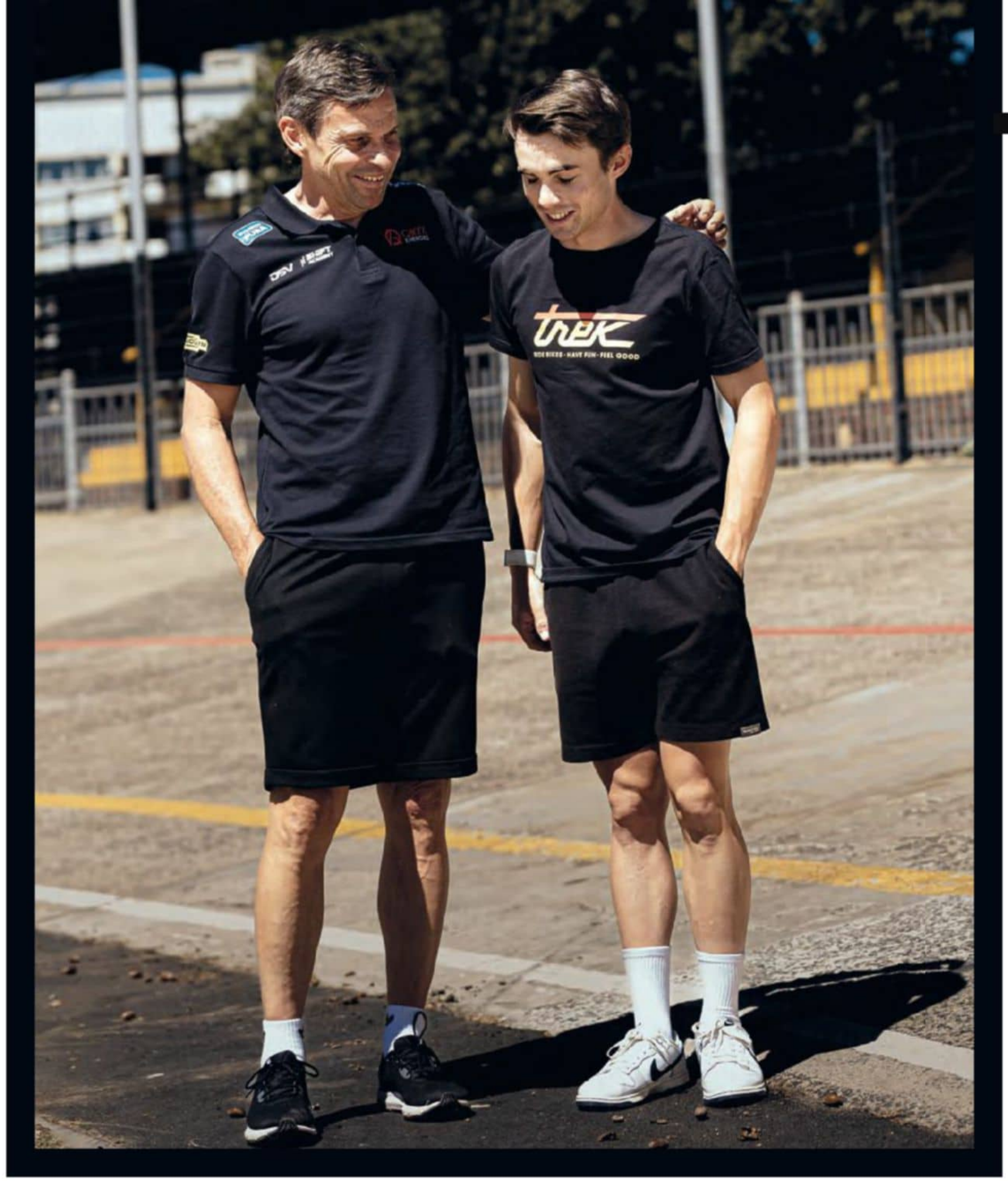
T: I think people always say, 'Oh yeah, you can win a Cycle Tour because your dad knows how to do it.' But it's one thing listening to *how* to do it, and another actually *doing* it.

When did you realise you may have inherited some cycling talent?

T: It was always a dream to be good; and even when I was racing track as a 12-year-old, I pretty much won everything. But at that point you run purely on talent. It's when you get older that you start to understand the tactics of road races, and because I'd spent so much time in team cars when I was young, I guess I understood racing quite well. Eventually, you get to

FINISH
Standard Bank
LIBERTY

Images: Mike Finch / CTCT



▲ **LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON.** ALTHOUGH TYLER IS DEFINITELY WINNING THE SOCK GAME...

Image: Mike Finch

a point when you start to get beaten, and you think, 'Okay, now I need to try this training thing a bit more.'

You've worked with legendary South African coach Barry Austin for six years now. What's that been like?

T: I've only really started getting big power in the last two years. Literally every week I've been getting better numbers, and working with Barry is amazing. Barry worked with my dad's team, but we didn't go the same coaching route until I was in Grade 9. My dad didn't want me to have a coach too early, because guys get bombarded with numbers they don't understand. And when you're young, you want to enjoy the sport for what it is.

Obviously my dad always gives me pointers and advice and things like that, but it's tricky. At the end of the day, a coach is there to push you hard, and a dad is there to be a dad. It's not the same.

Both my parents – and Barry – also encouraged me to get my matric done before I started thinking seriously about cycling. He'd tell me that you can't focus 50-50, so it's better to get your schooling done properly before you focus on riding. My Dad knows how hard the sport can be, and that it can end at any point with a crash. You need to have your future in mind beyond cycling.

Yeah, your dad knows all about those long, lonely hours when you're training!

T: It's a hard sport. Training-wise, it's crazy. You have to train through the December holidays, which is not fun when everyone else is relaxing. There are way more bad days than good. I mean, winning the Cycle Tour was good; but I probably had a hundred bad days before that.

Before your win at the Cycle Tour, you had some great results at the Tour du Cap, where you won two stages, won the Sprint Classification, the King of the Mountains jersey...

T: My main goal was the Cycle Tour on the Sunday, so I didn't aim for the overall GC because I wanted to have easier days. But winning the stages and grabbing the jerseys was a real confidence booster, and I felt that I had good legs at the Cycle Tour.

That final sprint to win was crazy, with the lead car getting in the way and you guys only catching the breakaway 300 metres from the line.

T: Yeah, it was crazy fast. The last 4km, we averaged just shy of 60km/h. It was nuts. I kind of just gambled because I did think it would come back, although I didn't think it would be so late in the race. The car stalled us a bit and we had to go around it. We didn't know if it was going to go left or right.

Reinardt [*Janse van Rensburg*] attacked from a long way out, which he often does, and that caught me off guard for a bit. It felt like it took ages for me to get on his wheel, and I eventually managed to get around him at the line.

Malcolm, when did you first hear that Tyler had won?

M: I was out on the course, and one of the spectators shouted, "Your boy won!" But then I thought, "I've got two Academy kids in the race too, so maybe it's one of them?" I stopped and asked him, and he confirmed it was Tyler. The tears just welled up. It was the weirdest feeling, because you know how much he's been through to get there. And I know you need a bit of luck to fall your way, too!

T: After the race, you know what it's like with the media – it's crazy, and then you have to go to doping control. I came back from that and was doing interview after interview; and midway through one of them, my dad walked in after he'd finished an interview of his own. It was a very special moment – I think there's a video of it somewhere.

M: I just wanted to give him a fat hug, because I knew what he was feeling.

Malcolm, you grew up in an era of cycling rife with drugs. It's always going to be an issue in the sport – how do you handle the thought that some riders may still be cheating, and affecting Tyler's future prospects?

M: It was tough back then, which is why I turned my back on Europe. Guys are always going to try something, especially with the amount of money in the sport.

I still believe club level is actually the worst, because there's less doping control and testing. In places like Belgium, you ride some of the crits there and they're crazy fast; then you go to a Continental race, which is supposed to be two levels higher, and it's half the speed. But I do think it's better at the top level now than it was back then.

What's the long-term dream for Tyler?

T: I want to win stages in big races in Europe. I'm not an overall, GC kind of rider – that's not my forte. I prefer to target certain days. Making it to the World Tour would be the dream, but the first goal would be to make it back into a Continental team again.

M: I think Tyler's a late bloomer. He rode for EF Education's Continental team in 2023-24. He's good, but he's going to have to work for it. **B**

▼ **FLAT OUT.** TYLER SPRINTS TO VICTORY IN THE 2025 CAPE TOWN CYCLE TOUR. CHAPEAU!

Imag: CTCT

WORDS & PICTURES: DINO LLOYD

CYCLING COACH AND EX-PRO, NIC WHITE, RIDES THROUGH SUIKERBOSRAND'S VARIED VISTAS.

ROADIE HEAVEN IN GAUTENG

SUIKERBOSRAND NATURE RESERVE, NEAR HEIDELBERG

DO YOU LIVE IN JOBURG OR PRETORIA? Are you secretly envious of Instagram feeds overflowing with scenic road rides in the Cape and KZN? You're not alone. But hold up a moment before you book a coastal getaway with your beloved bike. Just an hour south of Jozi is a 200km^2 wilderness that offers a unique and – crucially – safe cycling experience; a welcome antidote to the urban hustle of Gauteng.

Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve is named after the Transvaal sugar bush (*Protea caffra*), which paints the eastern and south-eastern parts of the reserve with its distinctive blooms. The reserve was declared in 1973 and remains a vital green lung on the Highveld, offering respite and adventure in equal measure.

Forget dodging traffic and the ever-present concerns of crime. Once you're through the reserve's gates, you're on a well-maintained, one-way tar road that unfurls like a ribbon across the undulating terrain. Early mornings here are particularly special: you'll see birds and huge mountain aloes lit by the sun as antelope graze among the koppies. Keep a keen eye out and you might even spot some silent sentinels of history – stone kraals scattered among the outcrops, remnants of old Bafokeng, Sotho and Tswana settlements.

The main 57km circuit in the reserve climbs to a respectable 1 917 metres above sea level to the highest point on the Witwatersrand, offering panoramic views that will take your breath away – if the climbing hasn't done so already. It's a proper test for any road cyclist. Expect an average gradient on the hills of around 7%, with some cheeky sections punching to 12% or more. And of course, with great climbs come exhilarating descents, where smart line choice, judicious braking and a healthy dose of calculated caution are your best companions. This kind of riding is unique to Gauteng, making

Suikerbosrand a valuable training ground.

A welcome respite arrives at the Sedaven Dam, roughly halfway around the loop. It's just the place to refuel and prepare mentally for the second half. This point also marks the lowest elevation in the reserve, so anticipate a series of climbs and descents leading towards the final, significant climb of the day.

If you can comfortably ride the full loop without completely breaking yourself, feeling strong even on the steeper inclines, then you'll know you're in decent shape for most big races on the calendar.

As always, remember the essentials: ample hydration, sufficient nutrition and a basic repair kit for any unexpected mechanicals. You're in a remote place, so self-sufficiency is key.

If you want more distance and a longer day in the saddle, consider starting your ride from the popular Circus Cafe in Midvaal, which will easily push your total mileage to more than 100km. And if you're on a bike with fat takkies, consider exploring some of the gravel roads that border the reserve.

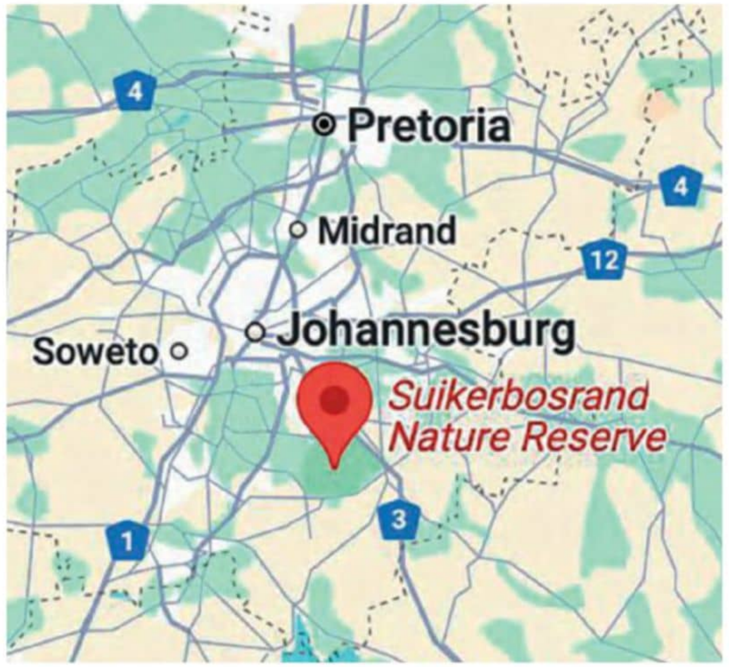
The reserve is managed by the Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (GDARD). It's a bit tired in places but is generally well-maintained and adequately staffed. It's a space that holds huge potential for tourism and conservation initiatives, but also as a high-altitude sports training centre. (Fun fact: Chris Froome, growing up in South Africa, trained in Suikerbosrand regularly. The reserve has also been used for the South African Road Champs.)

There you have it. Ditch the traffic, embrace the climbs, and who knows – you might just find your next favourite cycling destination that will make your friends in Cape Town jealous. Get out there and let those sugarbush ridges put a grin (or well-earned grimace) on your face! **B**

Images: Canva / Supplied

▲ [ABOVE LEFT] ENJOY THE SOLITUDE IN SUIKERBOSRAND. [ABOVE RIGHT] FORMER SA ROAD CHAMP ANRIETTE SCHOEMAN TESTS HER LEGS IN THE RESERVE.

◄ YOU MIGHT CROSS PATHS WITH A BLACK-BACKED JACKAL.



THE DETAILS

■ **WHERE?** Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve is just outside the town of Heidelberg, about 70km south of Joburg's suburbs. Access the reserve via the R550.

■ **DISTANCE:** About 60km for the full loop, which is made up of a punchy 10km loop and a more undulating 50km loop.

■ **ELEVATION GAIN:** About 700m

■ **GATE TIMES:** 7am–4pm on weekdays; 6am–4pm on weekends (Exit by 6pm latest). Call ahead to check times to avoid disappointment (011 439 6300).

■ **ENTRANCE FEES:** R45 per adult; R35 for pensioners and kids aged 3-11. Enquire about an annual pass.

■ **FRIENDS OF SUIKERBOSRAND.** This volunteer organisation plays a vital role in supporting the reserve. Visit *friendsofsuikerbosrand.co.za* and follow them on social media to stay informed about the latest developments and contribute to their efforts.

■ **REMEMBER!** You're in a conservation area, so take everything out that you take in, and if you spot any litter, do the right thing and pick it up. There are off-road trails in the reserve, but these are strictly for hiking; cycling is only permitted on the tar road. Also note that escort vehicles are not allowed.

Interview by **DAVID MOSELEY**
Portrait by **MIKE FINCH**

SOUTH AFRICAN COACHES AND SPORTS SCIENTISTS ARE GLOBALLY RESPECTED FOR THEIR EXPERTISE, AND **DR JEROEN SWART** IS AMONG THE BEST. HERE'S HOW HE'S HELPED MAKE UAE TEAM EMIRATES THE NUMBER-ONE TEAM IN THE WORLD.

HOME GROWN, WORLD CLASS

Dr Jeroen Swart at home in Cape Town, where he lives when he's not chasing the pro peloton through a European summer.

UAE Team Emirates celebrates after winning the 2024 Tour de France.

Image: Sprint Cycling Agency / UAE Team Emirates

TADEJ POGAČAR, ADAM YATES, MATT BEERS, CHRIS FROOME, and indeed anyone who has benefited from the training programmes of Science to Sport… you all owe Kevin Costner a thank you. It was his role as sports physician Marcus Sommers in the iconic cycling movie *American Flyers* – plus watching the Tour de France every year – that inspired Jeroen Swart to become a sports scientist.

"In my head, I wanted to win the Tour de France – and I also wanted to be the guy that Kevin Costner was in the movie, the guy who knew everything about sport," says Swart. "I was 11 at the time; and now, holy shit, nearly 40 years later, everything I've done has led to this moment."

What does the role 'Head of Performance' at UAE Team Emirates actually entail? When I joined the team in 2019, we were 16th in the world. At that point, there were clear gaps that I started plugging, looking at things like biomechanics, nutrition, load monitoring and so on. I did a lot of the work myself, but my actual role when they hired me was to find people who were at the cutting edge. My job was to recruit them, manage them, and ensure we could deliver the absolute best.

What was the vision for UAE when you joined? We wanted to be the number-one team in the world. And we wanted to win the Tour de France, which we managed to do within two years, when Tadej Pogačar won in 2020.

It was marginal in 2020, more convincing in 2021, and by 2023 we were the best team in the world. That was five years on from the team camp where we outlined our goals.

Fans see the riders racing and winning, but a team is more than that. Tell us what goes on behind the scenes. It's a huge team effort. We have more than 100 staff. Like any big organisation, it's a management structure, and goes down to every person who has a role to play in day-to-day activities. *My* day-to-day activity is to manage the coaching staff, implement the team philosophy and methods, organise the training camps, test riders, oversee the development of our data platform and engage with the team about nutrition and equipment.

Our Team Principal and CEO, Mauro Gianetti, lets us do our work. He doesn't micromanage. I think that's what's happened at some other teams… Micromanagement doesn't work – you have to trust your team, and let people get on with it.

What does 'performance' mean to you? There are two questions here: 'What is performance?' and 'What does performance *amount* to?' What it amounts to is us winning races and scoring points. What goes into it is a broad-based multidisciplinary environment, where all aspects are addressed.

I think a key part of that is knowing where to spend your time and effort. A lot of teams go wrong when they follow the latest trend or idea and they invest heavily in that trend, but it doesn't really move the needle. So, knowing where to apply your energy and getting the maximum return is a huge part of performance. The same is true in cycling, Formula 1, and indeed in any business.

Okay, so how do you move the needle? This is where my role as a generalist comes to the fore. For instance, you can have someone who knows everything about genetic sequencing technology, they're a leading expert in that field; but outside of it, they know very little. Generalists are people who know a lot about a lot, but they don't know everything about anything.

Being a generalist allows me to identify the experts in each field, and work out how they could fit into the overall puzzle. You could use the analogy of an orchestra conductor – I make sure everybody is playing their part.

> **"YOU COULD USE THE ANALOGY OF AN ORCHESTRA CONDUCTOR – I MAKE SURE EVERYBODY IS PLAYING THEIR PART."**

So, you're looking into everything at all times? Basically, yes. When it comes to nutrition, for example, I help our nutrition sponsor, Enervit, develop the right products in line with the latest science, and ensure that the products are palatable and that the riders actually like them. Then there's the macronutrient part – the meals – where we have three chefs who prepare our meal plans at all our races and training camps.

At an equipment level, it's looking at different wheels from Enve and tyres from Continental, and deciding which tyre on which rim at which pressure is the right combination to maximise performance. Then it's looking at what's most aero, rolling resistance on various surfaces, weight and rotational inertia – and where a particular stage or race fits into that picture.

We do all these things on a daily basis. There's a lot of coordination; a lot of communication.

Wow, that's a dizzying amount of detail. How do you avoid analysis paralysis? You have to be honest. A coach might think we should do something, for example. It might be a good idea, or an interesting idea, but my role is to decide whether that idea fits into the overall plan, and whether we have the time and resources to implement it. It's a layering process.

It's impossible to know everything and implement everything. Every year you understand what works, and you learn that a philosophy that might have seemed attractive isn't working; so you discard it, and you keep the things that do work.

We have protocols, and they become so embedded that they become second nature, and only then do we layer on something new. Layer upon layer; and then, one day, you end up with the most beautiful cake!

Is it 'Tour de France' and then everything else, or do you look at every race in the calendar? The calendar is super-important. Our Sports Manager, Matxin Joxean Fernandez, looks at the calendar with the other directors and coaches, and decides which riders will go to which races based on what we see as the optimal way to win them.

You have to look at the other teams, too – we might choose to send a second-string team to a race because we know Alpecin is going to come with Jasper Philipson and win

UAE Team Emirates' winning ways: at the 2024 Giro d'Italia (right) and at the 2024 Tour de France (far right and below).

Images: Sprint Cycling Agency / UAE Team Emirates

that race. We're not going to invest our best riders where they'll likely finish fourth or fifth; we'd rather send them to another race where they're going to win.

How important *is* the Tour de France, then? It's the biggest race in the world, with the most exposure. It's also the most important for the sponsors. But as a team, we've moved beyond only looking at the Tour.

A decade ago, Team Sky... They were all about the Tour. Or Grand Tours, I should say. They seldom featured anywhere else. Our approach is to win throughout the season, from the Tour Down Under to the final races of the year, like the Tour of Guangxi.

Does it make your life easier or harder when you're working with an athlete of Tadej Pogacar's ability? We're very lucky with Tadej. Not only is he incredibly gifted physically, he's also incredibly strong mentally and emotionally – he's the best kind of rider to have in a team. He engages with staff and other riders. He's demanding, but he's never a prima donna. He's level-headed and down to earth.

As an example, he doesn't feel he should have better equipment than anyone else. If we present him with a lighter version of a frame, his first question is, "When are the other riders getting this frame?" That motivates everyone. When it comes to tactics, he never expects everyone to just help him win races – he wants other riders to win, too. He encourages the other riders.

What about the other riders – how do you manage everyone's egos, when everyone wants to win? It's a team effort, and it's something we work on all the time. It's not just about selecting riders based on performance – we've seen the detrimental effects of that. Instead, we have a similar selection policy to the All Blacks' 'no dickheads' policy. We screen riders' personalities to ensure that the athletes coming in will elevate the status of the whole team, instead of just going by performance.

Again, communication is so important. We might have a discussion with a rider and say, "Your role will be to support Tadej at the Tour de France, but there will be other opportunities along the way – at the Giro or the Vuelta." If you're a rider at another team, you know that Tadej is probably going to the Tour; so you can join our team and be part of that success, or you can go elsewhere and roll the dice.

Look, it's not all about Tadej. Last year we won 81 races – Tadej won 25 of those. It was the greatest number of riders winning races in the history of the sport. We had around 20 different winning riders.

Is having such a dominant team like UAE good or bad for the sport? If you're the top dog, people are always going to want to see you fail. They'll always root for the underdog. Still, I think the way that we win – and the panache of riders like Tadej – means that people enjoy watching us.

Look at Milan-San Remo – the way we rode it this year was very exciting. Everyone knew our plan, and it was up to the likes of Mathieu van der Poel to deal with our tactics and win the race, which he did. But our tactics created huge excitement, which you wouldn't have without us.

If you go back to the days of Sky, people hated that. That was boring racing – seven guys in a row, peeling off one by one, with one guy eventually moving to the front. Grand Tours since 2020 have been very exciting.

So, yes, winning too much does annoy a certain percentage of the crowd, and it makes people root for your rivals. It's the *way* we win that makes the racing exciting.

Do you think your success is forcing other teams to raise their standards? Jayco-AlUla, Lidl-Trek and others – they're all recruiting the right people and pushing hard.

For example, there's always a stage now in the Grand Tours – usually in the final week – that scares us. It's usually stage 18 or 19, the last big mountain stage; and it's attack, attack, attack, from the word go. A group of 20 will go that contains four or five guys who are a threat to the GC. They'll build up a lead of eight or nine minutes, which causes chaos in the race.

But I digress... The answer is 'yes' – the other teams are definitely lifting their game!

What's more important – the science or the talent? You need both. There are lots of riders with phenomenal talent. Thibaut Pinot, for example, is one of the most talented riders of his generation; but he never won any major races.

The French approach of panache over all else... There's no room for that. If you bring that approach, you *will* lose. If you don't apply the science, you *will* lose. With the amount of talent in the World Tour, you're not going to win on talent alone. You have to have both.

Where to from here, in terms of performance? How much further can you push the human body? We're still some way from the ultimate. Every year we think, 'Oh, jeez. Our guys are not going to get any faster.' But then we make some changes, and they do get faster.

Tadej is a great example. In the winter of 2023, we asked, 'Where are the gaps in his performance?' At the time, he'd come second

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▶ Tadej Pogačar, the best cyclist in the world and maybe the best ever, celebrates yet another Tour de France stage win.

Image: Getty Images

> **“WE DON’T JUST MEASURE THINGS BECAUSE THEY EXIST – WE LOOK AT ALL THE TESTS ON OFFER AND SEE IF PEOPLE HAVE BEEN DOING THEM WRONG.”**

at the Tour de France and he was ranked the number-one cyclist in the world. But we still asked, ‘How can he improve?’ We identified three or four areas where he might improve by a percent. We implemented the changes, and on some metrics we’ve seen a six-, seven-, eight-percent improvement. That was a surprise. You think you’re at the limit, but you don’t actually know where the limit is.

That said, there’s been a paradigm shift in cycling, and the areas for improvement are getting smaller. Back in the day, Team Sky had a scientific approach, but they *didn’t* have a scientific approach – if that makes sense. Their marginal gains approach still had gaps. We’ve found most of those gaps, and we keep finding new ones. But they’re getting harder to find!

So, where are the gains going to come from in the future? The UCI keeps changing things, especially when it comes to bike design. Last year, there were changes to the overall dimensions – maximum length relative to width. That’s what resulted in the dramatic design of our new aero bike. So, as regulations change, there’s a lot of scope for technical innovation.

If you ride a bike from a decade ago and you compare it to the current bike, you can feel the difference. And if a ‘normal’ rider like me can feel the difference, can you imagine what it’s doing for the pros? It’s like going from a gravel bike to a road bike – the difference between our bike in 2020 and our bike in 2025 on a climb like the Col de la Madone is about two and a half minutes.

What about the riders themselves – can they do more? Physically, some areas are topping out. Like nutrition – we used to think that the maximum gut absorption rate for monosaccharides or sugars was 80g an hour; now we’re seeing evidence emerging that it’s around 110g per hour. That’s one of the reasons the guys are going so fast from the gun, and producing performances on the final climb that are mind-blowing: a large part of it has to do with nutrition. When we started in 2019, we were doing 40- to 60g, and pushing the guys to do 80g at key moments in the stage. Now it’s 110g from the start, and boom.

Last year, after lots of research, we introduced heat training, which gave our riders another massive performance gain. If we see similar innovations coming, there’s always scope to push things further.

What’s been the biggest change you’ve seen in terms of performance, since being involved with UAE? The main thing has been monitoring the riders, and stopping them from training too hard. They were missing that optimal cycle between training and recovery, adaptation and improving. Many of them weren’t improving – and some were even going backwards, because they were getting progressively fatigued throughout the season.

Monitoring the riders has been massive. The equipment changes have been massive, too. There’s probably about a dozen different elements that have changed.

Has cycling moved beyond the ‘Armstrong Era’? Is the racing clean? Absolutely. The problem is that you can never prove a negative. But being embedded with the riders and the staff, there’s a complete change in the whole ethos. I haven’t seen anything that has given me pause in the seven years I’ve been on the World Tour.

I can’t speak for other teams, though, and I’m sure there must be cheating. It’s human nature that if you want to succeed and there’s a big payoff, there will always be cheating. But from a cultural perspective, there’s been a massive change.

I wouldn’t risk my reputation just to win races. My reputation is everything to me – I wouldn’t have joined the team if I didn’t think the culture had changed completely.

Do the riders ever bring up that era of racing? We ignore that era. Most of them don’t really talk about it. Occasionally there’s the odd joke about it, but it’s not something we actively discuss. We just accept that the culture has changed, and that it’s a new era of racing.

Why do South Africans seem to excel at sports science? Cycling is very popular in South Africa, thanks to prestige races like the Cape Epic, which put us on the global stage and motivated world-class riders like Burry Stander, Alan Hatherly, Kim le Court, Matt Beers…

My partners and I started Science to Sport in 2008 – it’s our global business that provides high-performance services around the world to pros and amateurs. We don’t just measure things because they exist – we look at all the tests on offer and see if people have been doing them wrong. In bike fitting, for example: why are we using a plumb line? We threw it out, because there was no evidence to support its effectiveness. We look at the science and make it accessible to the athlete – something they can use to make a real difference in their performance.

Fast forward to 2025 and we have seven partners and 10 associates, and we operate on three continents and in many different countries. We’re recognised as globally leading experts. When Specialized Factory Racing needed a Head of Performance, they came to us. We put Mike Posthumus forward, and he’s made them the number-one team in the world.

It’s been a long and eventful journey, and here we are. **B**

MAN, DOG, DESERT.

WORDS & IMAGES BY SEAN FRAENKEL

JOIN SEAN FRAENKEL AND HIS JACK RUSSELL ROCKY AS THEY EMBARK ON AN UNSUPPORTED 1 200KM ODYSSEY ACROSS THE NAMIB DESERT TO RAISE FUNDS FOR ANIMAL WELFARE – ONE (PAINFULLY SLOW) PEDAL STROKE AT A TIME.

THE DESERT IS AN UNFORGIVING LANDSCAPE...

...that strips you down to your bare essentials and teaches you the meaning of resilience.

Riding through the Namib with my loyal dog Rocky, I couldn't help but think of *The Sheltering Desert*, a 1957 memoir by German geologist Hanno Martin. His tale of survival and adaptation in the harsh Namibian wilderness echoed my own journey, offering an unexpected connection between my adventure now and his time hiding in the desert to avoid internment during World War II.

I dubbed our adventure 'Rocky's Ride' – an unsupported 1 200km bikepacking trek from Swakopmund to the Orange River. I'd be following a route called 'SAND Segment 4', which was pioneered by Capetonian Johan Wahl and is featured on *bikepacking.com*. I'd be doing the route in reverse, north to south, and I was hoping to raise R50 000 for the Kloof & Highway SPCA outside Durban.

My touring rig consisted of a two-wheeled trailer loaded with food, clothing and survival gear, while Rocky rode up front in a plastic carrier mounted on the front fork. On smoother stretches, his carrier doubled as makeshift aero bars, and he'd rest his head on my arm. The conversations were mostly one-sided, but I kept talking anyway – rambling about the terrain, my aching legs, or whatever random thoughts crossed my mind, as if he understood every word.

With minimal training squeezed in around my hectic schedule as an offshore diver, I set off on the ride full of high hopes. It didn't take long for reality to set in: the weight of my gear (and, let's be honest, my love handles) and the unforgiving terrain had me questioning my chances of successful completion more than once.

The Namib's Brutal Beauty

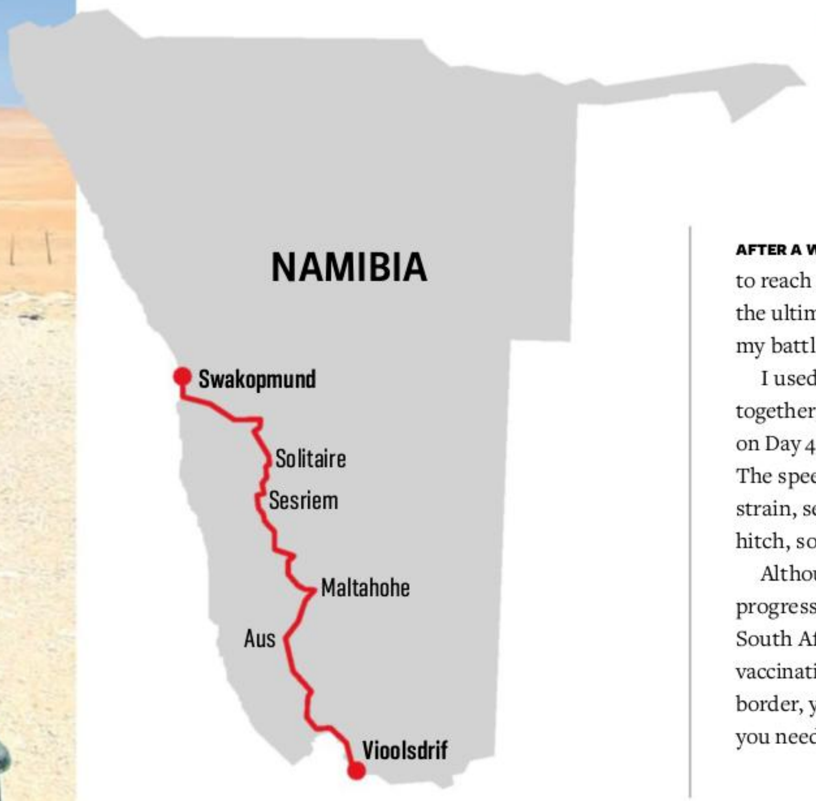
Temperatures in the desert fluctuate dramatically; especially during the winter months, when the nights are cold and the days often the opposite. The terrain can be incredibly harsh, but the desert also rewards you with some of the most pristine landscapes imaginable. The endless white gravel roads, which burn the eyes after several hours on the bike, and the relentless corrugations tested my endurance and my resolve.

'Adapt' became my mantra. I learned to camp wild, ration water, and navigate with apps like iOverlander. Every day was a juggling act, carrying just enough supplies without feeling like I was towing a small house behind me.

On Day 3, leaving the Gaogeb Training and Research Station – an isolated dot in the middle of the Namib/Naukluft National Park – I braced myself for some of the most desolate terrain I'd encounter on the whole route. A subtle 30km climb was made even worse by horrible gravel, a merciless headwind, and the scorching midday sun.

Fully loaded with dog, bike, water and gear, my rig weighed a hefty 70kg. Add my 100kg body weight, and you can imagine my painfully slow progress. I saw only one car that day, and I had to ration my water carefully. It took me 11 hours to ride 60km – one of the toughest days of the expedition.

However, that night I camped wild for the first time, in a huddle of camelthorn trees beneath a blanket of stars. Rocky and I went fully feral, embracing the desert's isolation. I set up camp in my birthday suit while Rocky rolled in springbok droppings. I attempted to clean him with a wet wipe before he climbed into the tent with me, but I didn't smell much better than him, to be honest. With water rationing in effect, I was covered in thick sand, salt and sweat.



ONE DOG, ONE BIKE, AND A DESERT THAT TESTED ALL THE AUTHOR'S RESERVES.

AFTER A WEEK OF GRAVEL ROADS that seemed to go on forever, I was thrilled to reach the village of Solitaire. Chocolate milkshakes and apple pie were the ultimate reward for my suffering – a brief respite before I continued my battle with the elements.

I used the workshop in Solitaire to weld my spare trailer hitch back together, after having already suffered one breakdown. It had happened on Day 4, about 30km into the Kuiseb Valley on a short and fast downhill. The speed caused my trailer to fishtail and the hitch snapped under the strain, sending the trailer tumbling. Fortunately I was carrying a spare hitch, so I could do some temporary repairs.

Although it wasn't a race, after some time I grew anxious about my progress. Rocky's paperwork was only valid for 30 days, so re-entering South Africa required careful timing. To travel with a dog, you need a vaccination and health certificate endorsed by a state veterinarian. At the border, you must present this certificate. If you stay longer than 30 days, you need new paperwork from a Namibian vet for re-entry back into SA.

Finding Solitude

I chose this route so I could immerse myself in the wilderness, and truly experience the raw beauty of the Namib.

After Mongolia, Namibia is the least densely populated country on earth. Wild camping in such a place means setting up in remote, untouched areas, being self-sufficient, and leaving no trace. On a bike tour, you become one with the desert – sand fills literally every crevice, and your salt-streaked clothes mark each hard-earned kilometre.

But cycling allows you to feel the rhythm of the land beneath you. Corrugations, hard-packed earth, sand... each has its own mood. Some days the road fights you, forcing your muscles to ache and your legs to pump like pistons. On other days, with a tailwind, the ride becomes effortless; almost like the desert is guiding you forward.

There's a certain peace that comes with being alone. After several days of riding, I found myself yearning for the quiet moments, the times when it was just me, Rocky, and the vast expanse of sand. That's when the desert would morph from adversary to companion, silently pushing me to my limits while rewarding me with moments of profound gratitude.

Day 9 led me to a cattle trough under a lone camelthorn tree – the only feature in a sea of sand as far as the horizon in all directions. If I pressed down the float valve, I had fresh water on demand: the perfect spot to set up camp.

That night, reading *The Sheltering Desert* by the light of my headlamp, I felt an even deeper connection to Henno Martin. His survival story reminded me that the isolation I faced was a gift – an opportunity to reflect, slow down, and appreciate life stripped to its essentials.

"ROCKY AND I WENT FULLY FERAL, EMBRACING THE DESERT'S ISOLATION. I SET UP CAMP IN MY BIRTHDAY SUIT WHILE ROCKY ROLLED IN SPRINGBOK DROPPINGS."

ROCKY TAKING IN THE RUGGED BEAUTY OF GOAIS CAMPSITE – WHERE ADVENTURE MEETS SERENITY ON A WORKING SHEEP AND GOAT FARM.

Close Encounters of the Gemsbok Kind

Gemsbok, springbok, warthog, ostrich, zebra, giraffe… These and many other animals crossed our path, sometimes too closely.

Rocky was in his element, darting after anything that moved. It was instinctual, primal – the kind of behaviour you can't train out of a dog that has been bred for the chase. Hunting is in his DNA! His energy never waned, no matter how many times I called him back. The desert may have been testing me, but it was pure entertainment for him.

On our evening in Solitaire, Rocky's fussiness over food led to a little excitement. He'd ignored his pork chop, which was sitting barely two metres from our tent in his bowl. As I lay half asleep, I heard a noise – faint, but enough to pull me from my haze. Poking my head out, I caught a jackal in the act of running off with Rocky's meal!

At Sesriem, we had another unexpected guest. While I was eating a sandwich, a Cape fox crept into camp. Thankfully, Rocky was snoring away inside the tent, oblivious. The fox was wary but curious, and I ended up sharing my sandwich with the creature, creating an unexpected moment of connection.

Unfortunately, not all encounters were so peaceful. Near Betta, three gemsbok appeared on the road ahead of us, caught on the wrong side of a game fence. Every time I rode closer, they'd sprint a few hundred metres, then stop and wait for us to catch up, repeating this game of tag for what felt like hours.

But things took a turn when a road grader came towards us from the opposite direction. The antelope panicked, and tried to clear the fence. Two made it over with ease, but the third got caught in the wire. I quickly tied Rocky to a fence post to avoid him being impaled on the long horns thrashing on the ground, and with the help of the grader crew, we freed the tangled buck. It lay there for a few tense moments, blood dripping from its mouth and from a gaping leg wound. I feared the worst; but one of the workers gave it a slap on the hindquarters and it scrambled upright and bolted, rejoining its companions.

As we made our way towards Barby Guest Farm near Helmeringhausen, two warthogs appeared, running parallel to the fence. I couldn't resist trying to capture the moment on my phone, while still pedalling – multitasking at its finest! But suddenly, everything slowed as I caught sight of a white blur: Rocky had launched himself from his carrier like Superman!

His landing, however, was far from heroic, as he tumbled backside over brains (or lack thereof). True to form, he bounced back up in one smooth motion and took off after the warthogs. I called out, worried he might be hurt; but he soon returned, looking a little sheepish, with just a scrape on his chin – proof that Jack Russells are indeed bulletproof.

Adaptation and Survival

As I rode, through shifting sand and across rugged plains, I learned that survival isn't just physical; it's about mental strength, and finding joy in small victories – like a refreshing breeze after hours of heat, or a stunning sunset after a gruelling day.

It's about knowing your limits and pushing beyond them, trusting that in its own way, the desert will provide. But the days ahead promised more challenges, moments when I questioned my sanity, when my body screamed for rest, and when I wondered if I could actually keep going.

Rocky had his own battles – chiefly, tolerating my singing. As we rode, I'd sing along to my playlist – more to distract myself from the monotony of pedalling than anything else. I often tell my girlfriend, "Just because I can't sing, it doesn't mean I *won't*." Out there in the Namib, there were no other humans to suffer through my off-key performances. I can carry a heavy load, but carrying a tune? Not so much.

Feeding Rocky was another issue. He's a notoriously picky eater, rejecting even the premium kibble I'd lugged along. Eventually, I resorted to biltong, droëwors and the occasional biscuit. While the high-protein diet kept him fuelled, it also led to an unpleasant side effect: constipation. That was fine until nighttime, when we were confined to the tent, and his farting became unbearable!

His left eye, prone to sunburn, was another concern. I had prescription eye drops and tried to keep the eye protected by covering it with duct tape while he was in his carrier. He'd rip off the covering as soon as he got out; but for the hours he spent in the basket, his eye was shielded from the sun and dusty wind.

I shared some of Rocky's medical mishaps. While walking barefoot in the sand near that cattle trough on Day 9, I'd stepped on a piece of wire. What started as a small injury got progressively worse. And as it was directly above my cleat, the pressure of pedalling started to get really uncomfortable.

(CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE) *DESERT LUXURY:* A CATTLE TROUGH, A GOOD BOOK, A GOOD FRIEND, AND ENDLESS SILENCE – WILD CAMPING AT ITS FINEST; *SHOE TEST:* THE DESERT IS HARD ON CYCLING KIT; *BUSH MECHANIC:* IN SOLITAIRE, THE AUTHOR HAD TO PUT HIS WELDING SKILLS TO THE TEST TO FIX HIS TRAILER HITCH; *NEW FRIENDS:* CROSSING THE NAMIBIAN DESERT WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE WITHOUT THE HELP OF STRANGERS.

◀ A DOG, A TENT AND A SEA OF SAND – WILD CAMPING IN THE NAMIB DESERT IS BOTH CHALLENGE AND REWARD, AND REWARDS ARE HARD-EARNED.

▶ THE TRUE MAGIC OF THE JOURNEY? ALL THE PEOPLE THE AUTHOR (AND COMPANION) MET ALONG THE WAY.

In need of some medical attention, and with no fancy tools at hand, I improvised. Using a large white spike from a camelthorn tree as my surgical instrument, I pierced my skin. Yellow pus erupted, instantly relieving some of the pressure. I prodded around to ensure there was nothing lodged inside, and then applied antiseptic cream to reduce the infection.

New Friends and Namibian Hospitality

It quickly became clear that crossing the desert without the help of strangers would be impossible. My journey would have ended abruptly without the support of others, and people's generosity and encouragement filled me with gratitude.

As cars approached, people often looked puzzled at first, but as they got closer and saw Rocky perched on my handlebars, smiles and laughter followed. His presence brought joy to everyone we met.

I met several adventure cyclists along the way, including a father and son from France who were cycling from Luanda to Cape Town. We shared a hunting cabin, and tackled a stretch of sand together. Yang, the son, swapped bikes with me for a short distance – his gravel bike struggled in the sand with its skinny tyres, while my wider tyres floated through like a camel across the Sahara. On hard terrain, though, their lighter bikes were far faster, speeding ahead with ease.

My path also crossed that of three Swiss cyclists riding from Cairo to Cape Town. They shared tales of their 12 000km journey – most of them positive, except for a moment at the Kenya/Ethiopia border when kids swarmed around them and stripped them of their gear. Despite this, their enthusiasm remained undimmed.

Over dinner at Betta Lodge, between Sesriem and Aus, I struck up a conversation with a woman named Liv – originally from Norway – and her 74-year-old Australian husband John, who was a geologist turned amateur artist. The next morning, after dropping off my trailer for yet more repairs, I joined John on an impromptu adventure so he could sketch the hills.

In search of some colourful terrain we met Martin and Bettina Günther, owners of a 5 500-hectare hunting farm, who welcomed us with filter coffee. They also shared their conservation philosophy: income from foreign hunters helps them preserve the land and wildlife in this remote part of Africa.

Martin was busy preparing a 'spiked' meal for the local baboons. A troop had been monopolising the food he left out for other wildlife during the drought, and to humanely deter them, he'd filled a five-litre tub with mielies and oats, adding a hefty amount of local gin. His plan was to get the baboons drunk, hoping they'd experience a terrible hangover and avoid returning. When I followed up with Martin a few weeks later, it turned out the plan had worked – the baboons were keeping a healthy distance!

"I FOUND MYSELF YEARNING FOR THOSE QUIET MOMENTS, THE TIMES WHEN IT WAS JUST ME, ROCKY, AND THE VAST EXPANSE OF SAND."

The Günthers' hospitality extended to a game drive and a nature walk, where we spotted wildlife and hiked to a dry waterfall, once part of an ox-wagon trail. Afterwards, their dogs and Rocky cooled off in a cattle trough. It was a day filled with genuine Namibian hospitality.

A Thousand Kilometres of Gratitude

Crossing the 1 000km mark felt monumental, and I continued to be humbled by the kindness of strangers.

Every day I flagged down passing vehicles for water, and without hesitation people stopped to help, filling my bottle with a smile, encouragement and a level of kindness that left me overwhelmed. Their actions were a powerful reminder of the deep well of human goodness.

Nelson Mandela once said, "What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead."

Those words echoed through my mind for many kilometres, as I realised just how significant acts of kindness had been during my own journey.

AS ROCKY AND I APPROACHED the Vioolsdrif border post, a tangle of emotions took hold: relief, mingled with a quiet sense of accomplishment.

This was the conclusion of an extraordinary journey, but it wasn't the end of the road. It wasn't just about the distance covered or the obstacles overcome; it was about what the desert had taught me about resilience and purpose.

The funds raised for animal welfare were more than numbers on a donation tracker, too: they symbolised hope and compassion. Each contribution was a reminder that even the smallest gestures can ripple outwards, changing lives in ways we might never fully grasp.

I crossed the border feeling lighter – not just from the journey's physical toll, but from the lessons learned. The solitude of the desert, the kindness of strangers, and the steady companionship of Rocky had become a mosaic of moments etched deep into my heart.

This isn't a story about triumph, in the conventional sense, or a neatly wrapped conclusion. It's an invitation for everyone to continue exploring. Go and look for those quiet, uncharted corners of yourself – you'll be surprised at what you find there. ***B***

Relive the adventure on Instagram: ***@rockysride***

THE CHEETAH OF NUMANSDORP

SINCE THE MOMENT HE ARRIVED ON THE WORLD TOUR SCENE IN 2022, YOUNG DUTCH SPRINTER **OLAV KOOIJ** HAS BEEN DESTINED FOR GREATNESS. HE'S HOPING 2025 WILL BE HIS YEAR.

By **EDWARD SWIER** | *Pictures* **BRAM BERKIEN** *(portraits)*, **TEAM VISMA** | **LEASE A BIKE**

> “SPRINTING IS A MATTER OF TIMING. WHEN IT ALL COMES TOGETHER, IT’S THE BEST FEELING THERE IS.”

THE DUTCH ARE MAD ABOUT THEIR pro riders; and as soon as someone demonstrates ability on the world stage, the nicknames are quick to follow.

Olympic champ Hennie Kuiper was The Gentleman; and Jan Janssen, winner of the 1968 Tour de France, was The Professor. Robert Gesink was The Condor of Varsseveld, and Olav Kooij – the peloton’s latest sprint sensation – is the Cheetah of Numansdorp. (No, not Humansdorp!)

He didn’t choose the nickname himself…

“But I can laugh about it,” he says. “Or, let me put it this way: it doesn’t bother me.”

The first time Kooij heard his nickname, he thought it would be a passing fad – funny one day, forgotten the next. But now the 23-year-old sprinter from Visma-Lease a Bike knows better, and his cheetah moniker is here to stay.

A cheetah is fast and its acceleration is extreme. It’s also a remarkable creature in that it doesn’t like to exert itself excessively. It saves its strength.

All of which is very fitting for Olav Kooij, who is also known for waiting. For *daring* to wait. He’s one of those sprinters that you don’t see all day – until he suddenly goes. And a moment later, he’s standing at the finish line holding the flowers.

“Sprinting is a matter of timing,” Kooij says. “When it all comes together, it’s the best feeling there is.”

Like every other passionate cycling fan, he’s curious about what 2025 will hold. After encouraging results from 2022, 2023 and especially 2024, even more is expected of him this year. By Kooij himself, too. He was the Team Visma-Lease a Bike leader at Milan-San Remo, and he’s still on the list as their number-one sprinter for the Giro in May, despite suffering a fractured collarbone at Gent-Wevelgem in March.

FROM THE ICE TO THE TARMAC

Team leader. World-class sprinter. How different his life looked five years ago.

As a young athlete, Kooij seemed destined to make a name for himself – but not on a bike. He was a champion long-track speed skater, and preferred the blades to all the other sports: tennis, football, athletics. Okay, he also liked cycling; but it was something he “did in the summer”. His idols back then? Legendary Dutch skater Sven Kramer, and Swiss TT superstar Fabian Cancellara.

In 2019, Kooij came second at the National Allround Championship for juniors – the most prestigious speed skating competition in the country – but he was already drifting towards

“I RIDE BIKES BECAUSE I ENJOY IT, BUT MY DRIVE COMES FROM THE COMPETITIVE ELEMENT OF THE SPORT.”

the bike, having been signed by the Jumbo-Visma development academy.

Every winter he still gets the itch. “Especially when it’s been cold for a few days in a row – then the itch comes quickly!” he says. He visited the ice a few times during the 2024/25 off season, but says that the feeling of being a skater is getting less every year. “Okay, I can still skate, but… I just feel more and more like a cyclist.”

He won’t allow himself to consider what he’d do if an Elfstedentocht was announced. (If you’re not Dutch, the Elfstedentocht is a 200km skating event along the frozen canals of the northern Netherlands, and is considered the pinnacle of the sport. But because natural ice is required, the conditions have to be perfect; the last event was held in 1997. If the conditions are right, the race is announced and starts within 48 hours.)

“No, I have other priorities now,” Kooij says with a laugh.

THESE DAYS, WINTER IS ALSO FOR riding – Kooij trains in Spain and at home in the Netherlands, on his favourite loops around his hometown of Numansdorp near Rotterdam. There are no easy kilometres however, even during the off season. Riding for the sake of riding has been out of the question for a long time; and Kooij says that honestly, he didn’t ride much for fun even when he was young.

He doesn’t know that wonderful feeling that many of us weekend warriors cherish: pedalling a few kilometres for the sheer enjoyment of it. “I’ve always been a fanatic competitive cyclist,” he says. “I think that part of me has always been there – I haven’t changed. Of course I ride bikes because I enjoy it, but my drive comes from the competitive element of the sport.”

He always wants to ride harder and faster; but according to Kooij, that doesn’t lead to monotonous training. “Watching my power data the whole time? No, that’s not necessary. And it’s not useful. Of course there’s a certain structure to my training that I try to adhere to – you want to arrive at a race at a good level – but there’s also *feeling* involved. You can’t overdo the structure, because you’ll lose that feeling.”

PINK DREAMS

Kooij actually spent very little time at home this past winter. “I think there are about six training camps a year now,” he says. “In December and January we spent some extra time in Spain, for a longer period, with the team. On top of that, I usually go a bit earlier, or I add a few more days at the end.”

That’s the life of a professional cyclist these days – you’re an international citizen. Races are everywhere, or you’re at a training camp far from home. You might as well call Kooij the Cheetah of Girona, or of Alicante.

It was on the Spanish coast that Kooij discussed his plans for 2025 with Visma-Lease a Bike. Although the sprinter makes no secret of the fact that he’d like to measure himself against the best of the best at the Tour de France, that’s unlikely to happen this year. Instead, the Giro is on the programme again.

The Corsa Rosa is where Kooij has seen his greatest success to date, winning an exciting sprint in Naples on 12 May 2024. Jhonatan Narváez seemed to be on his way to a solo victory; but after a massive pull by GC leader Tadej Pogačar, Narváez just couldn’t stay out of the peloton’s grasp. Jonathan Milan, who had already won stage 4, seemed destined to claim another victory – but Kooij managed to squeak past him in the final millimetres.

That victory was confirmation of what insiders had been hinting at for a long time: Kooij is a real talent. Anyone who hasn’t been paying attention will often mention Dylan Groenewegen and Fabio Jakobsen as the Dutch sprinters to watch; but although they’re probably still the best *known*, they’re no

OLAV KOOIJ
Born: 17 October 2001

Significant wins:
- Stage win at Giro d'Italia (2024)
- Hamburg Cyclassics (2024)
- 3 x stage wins at Paris-Nice (2023, 2024)
- 4 x stage wins at Tour of Poland (2022, 2023, 2024)
- Winner ZLM Tour (2022, 2023)
- Clasica de Almeria (2024)
- Münsterland Giro (2022)

"I DON'T SPECIFICALLY FOCUS ON HILLS IN TRAINING, BUT CLIMBING COMES NATURALLY TO ME – IT TAKES A BIT LESS EFFORT."

longer the best. Kooij is the man now.

That said, he prefers to avoid the comparisons. "I'm mainly busy with my own thing, that's how I am," he says. "We have several good sprinters in the Netherlands. Dylan and Fabio have been around for a few years longer, so it might be logical that more people know about them."

A CLIMBING SPRINTER

Kooij is not a braggart. If anything, he's more of an introvert. Off the bike, he hardly considers himself the first among equals. "Your name is mentioned more often if you've won a stage in a Grand Tour, of course," he says. "That kind of thing appeals to people. But to be honest, I don't really think about it all very much."

Still, winning a stage at the Tour, Giro or Vuelta always increases your status, and you tend to get a little more respect from colleagues. You have more say in the team, right?

Kooij laughs. "There's always some verbal arm wrestling in the cycling world," he says. "Although it mainly happens on the bike. I like that. In some other sports, the chit chat is much more part of the entertainment. Fortunately, in cycling the action mostly happens on the road."

What he definitely does have over many other sprinters, including Groenewegen and Jakobsen, is his ability to get over bumps on the circuit with relative ease. He's also getting better at uphill sprints, and he seems to manage better in the high mountains than many of the peloton's other speed demons.

"I don't specifically focus on hills in training, but climbing comes naturally to me – it takes a bit less effort. Of course I'll never climb with the best of the best; but for a sprinter, I'm not doing too badly."

Kooij's 2024 season ended rather abruptly. He still had ambitions to ride Paris-Tours and the Tour of Guangxi, but he was suffering from a mysterious knee pain that turned out to be caused by a small stone embedded in the joint, probably from an earlier crash during the Renewi Tour. Surgery was required and Kooij got some early rest; but luckily the down time was brief, and he was able to resume training again relatively soon thereafter.

If you need surgery and you're a pro cyclist, early October is probably the best time to do it. "The knee op had no effect on my training," Kooij confirms. "And I've had no issues since."

WOUT AS LEAD-OUT MAN

At the Giro d'Italia this year, Kooij can hopefully count on the support of Wout van Aert. The Belgian superstar was supposed to go to the Giro in 2024, but a crash during Dwars door Vlaanderen in late March resulted in a broken collarbone and several fractured ribs, and he withdrew. This year, however, the intention is for Van Aert to act as Kooij's lead-out, much like Mathieu van der Poel has done for Jasper Philipsen, to great success.

But the real question is whether Kooij *deserves* a full lead-out train – a team structured around his ability to win sprints. He's the first to admit that it won't happen at Visma, since the team almost always has GC ambitions. There are options, though: the Van Dijke brothers – Mick and Tim – might have left for Red Bull-BORA-Hansgrohe, but Dan McLay is a valuable signing; the Briton was the lead-out for Arnaud Démare at Arkéa.

After winning 12 times in 2023, Kooij 'only' won eight times last year. Is he concerned? Not at all. The victories in 2024 were definitely at a higher standard. In addition to his Giro stage win, he also won stages at Paris-Nice and at the Tour of Poland. "Seven of those eight victories were at World Tour level. That says something."

Incidentally, Kooij was the first rider to win a stage in a grand tour after graduating from the Visma-Lease a Bike development ranks. "That's a great achievement for everyone," Kooij says. "And it's the result of the team having started a development squad when it did. Last winter, the next batch of development guys turned pro. My route appeals to those new talents – they can see the path. And they want to follow it."

Although Kooij had *his* personal best year ever, 2024 was a bit of a disaster for Visma-Lease a Bike. The year previously, everything had gone the way of the Killer Bees; but last year was a mess. Plagued with injuries to their key riders, it just rained bad luck. And the Gent-Wevelgem crash was the last thing he needed right at the beginning of the 2025 season. How difficult is it for a sprinter to keep performing under those kinds of circumstances?

Kooij is philosophical. "It's always better when the whole team is doing well, like in 2023," he says. "But regardless of what's going on, you just have to keep doing your thing, prepare as best as possible, and try to get the best out of every race." *B*

UNLOCK THE SECRETS OF CYCLING'S SUPER-SENIORS

MEET THE SWEDISH OLD-AGERS WHO PROVE YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD TO RIDE HARD...

BY BILL DONAHUE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTIN WICHARDT

STIG JOHANSSON
ON HIS HUSQVARNA
SINGLE-SPEED,
DURING THE 2024
VÄTTERNRUNDAN.

IT'S AMAZING HOW FRAIL A CYCLIST CAN FEEL ON THE CUSP OF A RACE, OR ANY ADVENTURE DESIGNED TO TEST THE SPIRIT.

It was mid-June, and I was in Sweden; on the shore of a glittering lake called Vättern, about to take part – along with 13 995 other riders, three-quarters of them Swedes – in what's billed as the "world's largest bike challenge": the 315km Vätternrundan.

It was a delightfully cool Friday evening and I should have been taking in the cobblestoned streets and 13th-century architecture of Motala, the minor city where the race has its start. I should have been casting my mind dreamily out onto the course: the route makes one clockwise loop around Vättern, Sweden's second-biggest lake, rolling through the long Swedish twilight as mist rises up from the water and the roads remain open to intermittent traffic.

But no; I was sullen and filled with dread, for my feet were hurting, and so were my calves. I was chastising myself for overtraining.

Meanwhile, a larger question churned within me. Just a couple of weeks after the Vätternrundan, I would be turning 60 and blustering into old age with the unalloyed hunger of a 25-year-old. I am one of those pathetic pensioners who still endeavours to attack on the hills, and I had to wonder: how does one segue gracefully into old age?

I was in the right place to ask, for the Vätternrundan is an event that prides itself on welcoming all comers. Sure, there are a few lean phenoms who barrel through the mostly flat course in just over seven hours. But the race, held annually, offers no prize money or even age-group awards, and the average finish time is about 13 and a half hours.

At the starting line, where racers are released in groups of 50 or so at two-minute intervals from Friday night into the wee hours of Saturday morning, many cyclists show up in street clothes and takkies. Rusty three-speeds are common in the peloton. And lots and lots of very old people take part.

At this year's race, 281 people over the age of 70 are starting. One guy, now 79, has completed every Vätternrundan since its 1966 inception! His name is Stig Johansson, and he religiously rides in ripped jeans and clogs while piloting a heavy steel single-speed, which was manufactured in 1937. There are 17 other Swedes – 16 men and one woman – participating in the event this year who have already completed 50 Vätternrundans.

In some ways, the longevity on display here is no surprise. Swedes have a long life expectancy – 83 years, as opposed to a fairly terrifying 65 in South Africa – and 68% of all Swedes own a bike, compared to less than 30% of South Africans. In almost any Swedish village, there are dedicated car-free bike lanes where serene, un-helmeted elders pedal along with canes strapped to their bike racks.

Meanwhile, exercise is very much a Swedish value. In so many small towns, the local culture is built around sports clubs where kids play soccer and ice hockey, and the habit of fitness persists into old age. Sixty-one percent of Swedish women over 70 are considered active, per WHO standards, as opposed to 35% in other developed countries like the US.

Ultra-endurance events have a special place in Swedes' hearts. Witness, for example, the Vasaloppet, a 90km cross-country ski race that draws 16 000 competitors to the frozen boglands of central Sweden each March. According to Daniel Svensson, associate professor of Sports Sciences at Malmö University, the fervour for such sadistic trials is historically rooted. "Sweden was built on activities like farming and forestry," he explains. "In our information age, finishing the Vasaloppet or the Vätternrundan is one way of manifesting that you still have a capable body and can work for a long time, even if you're very old."

At the moment, I'm awaiting a planned meeting with one of the oldest people ever to start the Vätternrundan. Anders Olsson (89) is a retired engineer and part-time forester who's finished the race 46 times. When Olsson shows up, he seems loose-limbed, at ease. His long white hair is drawn into a makeshift ponytail, and his white beard is trim. He speaks English precisely, his voice a murmur, and even though his start time is but 40 minutes away, he smiles and makes quiet, self-deprecating jokes.

DAWN BREAKS DURING THE 2024 VÄTTERNRUNDAN.

I admire his poise, and ask a question that I hope might guide my race: "What's your strategy?"

"Well," Olsson says, pointing, "I will start up there, and we will see if and when I come back! Hopefully, I will enjoy the red poppies in the fields after Motala. They are extremely beautiful. And then, south of Ödeshög, I expect to listen to the nightingale singing. There is usually a wonderful nightingale concert."

I watch him push his bike – a 20-year-old Specialized Sirrus – up a grassy hill towards the line. An elastic bandage wraps his left knee, but he moves forward with slow determination, like a soldier going into battle.

★★★

CYCLING IS A VERY GOOD FORM OF EXERCISE FOR OLDER PEOPLE. A 2021 study found that cyclists are able to mitigate the "decline in walking performance" that comes with ageing.

Typically, people over 65 expend 15-20% more energy walking than their juniors over the same distances. But a research team led by evolutionary biologist Daniel Aslan, at the University of Southern California, found that cyclists older than 65 used nearly the same amount of energy as younger adults when walking identical distances. Seniors who walk for exercise did not fare as well in the study.

Meanwhile, a 2022 experiment found that cyclists over 65 had better balance than non-cyclists – significant, given how many seniors suffer devasting fall-related injuries.

The American Heart Association recommends 150 to 300 minutes a week of moderate exercise. What about *more* exercise than that?

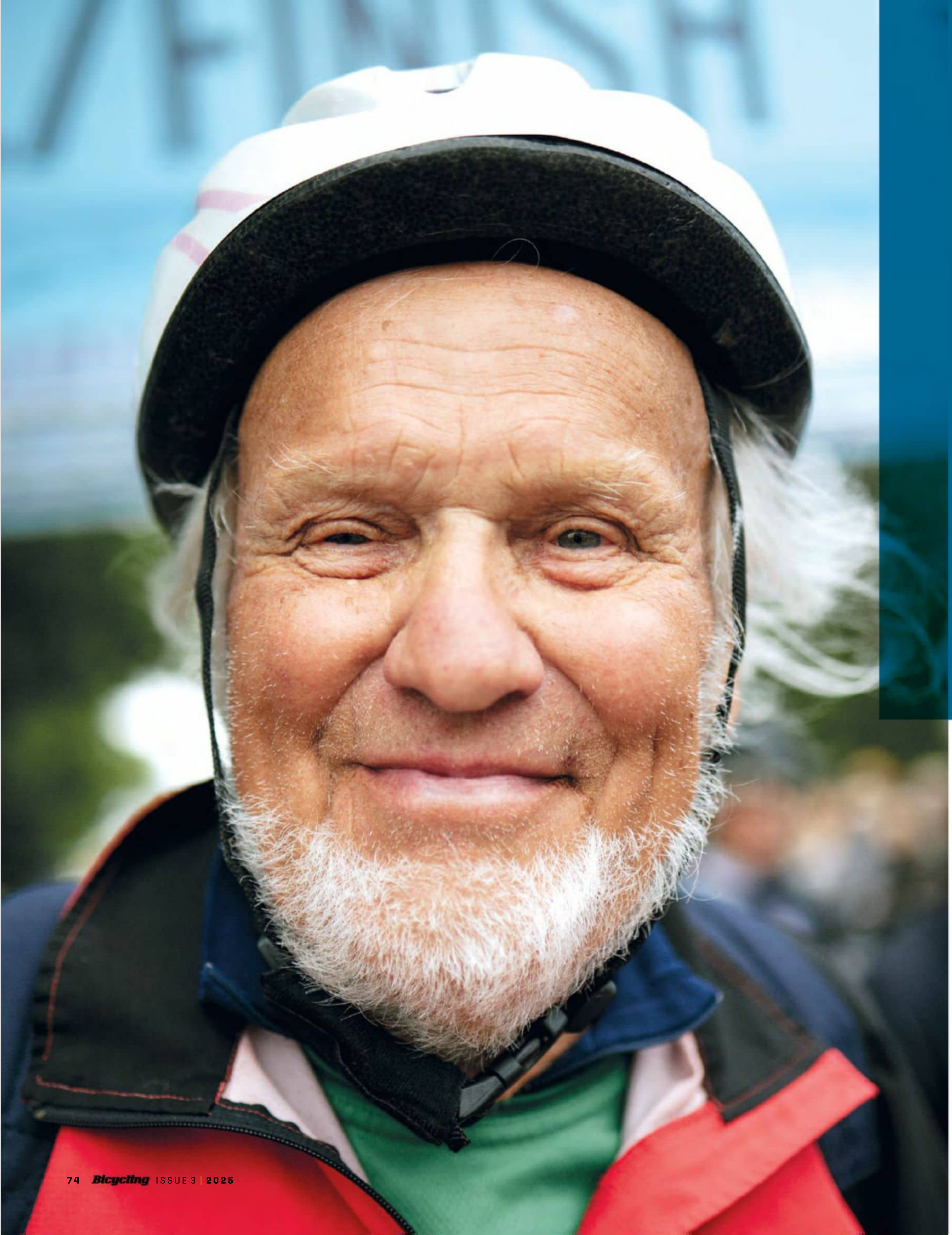
Well, too much might not actually be the ticket to longevity. A 2021 paper published in the *European Heart Journal* reported that male endurance athletes (those who exercise well over suggested guidelines) older than 40 are disproportionately plagued by plaque buildup in their coronary arteries, as well as scarring of their heart muscles, and both afflictions probably increase their chance of having a heart attack.

An earlier study, published in 2013, drills down further on senior athletes. A team of Norwegian researchers compared more than 500 men, aged 65 to 90, who took part in their country's most popular cross-country ski race, the 53km Birkebeinerrennet, and found that the skiers were about 30% more likely to experience atrial fibrillation (A-fib), a sometimes deadly cardiac arrhythmia, than their agemates in the general population. Older female endurance athletes are less studied, but a 2023 paper in the medical journal *BMC Geriatrics* says that "rudimentary reports" indicate that they too are at increased risk of suffering A-fib.

There are some physiological truths here: when we get older, life asks us to slow down, to have naps, to leave the club before the band starts its second set. Meanwhile, a certain impulse inside nearly all of us yearns to burn on, hopeful that time will never lay its grim hand on our shoulder.

For me, the most intriguing questions are not physiological but psychological: how do we reconcile with the dimming of our powers? Is it possible to find a happy medium between going for it and just smelling the flowers?

At the Vätternrundan, the stars are not the speedsters but rather those who seem to have cracked the riddle of ageing. I witness this myself on Friday evening, as the race's first wave rolls out of Motala amid loud, pumping rock music. At 7.32pm the Swedish-language emcee goes ballistic, for suddenly there's a



celebrity in our midst.

Stig Johansson, he of the clogs and jeans, pays no heed to assigned starting times – he's earned the right to show up in Motala on his own timetable. And he's here now, moving towards the starting line, wearing jeans with a gaping hole in the knee. His long white hair flows freely, and when he laughs – this happens every 30 seconds or so – it comes out as a loud, toothy seal bark. His helmet, meanwhile, is topped by a giant, floppy red pompom. Called a čuipi, a hat like this is traditionally worn by Sweden's indigenous Sami people, and Stig's was made by a Sami craftsman. He says he wears it for some visual razzle-dazzle.

When Stig rounds the corner at the base of the first hill, maybe 100 metres into the race, he grins and waves to the throng of spectators gathered there, and they volley back with a whoop of joy.

A few kilometres later, in the quiet outside of town, he'll reach into his handlebar basket and switch on the cassette player nestled there. Over the next 24 hours, as he rolls along at a dawdling 13km/h, he'll play a medley of peppy, upbeat Swedish dance music from bands like Sven-Ingvars, founded in 1956 and still flourishing. For Swedes, the music carries the nostalgic, familiar magic that, say, early Elvis does for Americans.

* * *

MY OWN VÄTTERNRUNDAN BEGAN ON Saturday morning, at 5.06 am. Pre-race, I'd tenuously attached myself to a group of a dozen middle-aged Swedes who hoped, as I did, to finish in under 10 hours. But as we pace-lined out of Motala and on through the poppy fields in the early-morning coolness, my teammates kept giving me the universal 'chill out' hand signal each time I floated to the front for a pull.

I was feeling strong. The pain in my feet had vanished (was it just anxiety?), and when a pack of about 40 riders began flying past, I recognised the aerodynamic opportunity before me.

"*Nine* hours!" I thought. "Nine, nine, nine!" I abandoned my team and joined the quick horde.

But there were problems. In Sweden – indeed, throughout Europe – cycling clubs can be tight social units. They drink cappuccino together three times a week. Outsiders can't just weave into their pacelines, and when I tried to do so, I was rebuffed.

"This is a closed group," one guy said. "Ride behind us."

I did. But back there, it wasn't easy keeping contact with the group, and whenever a gap opened, requiring a sprint… well, I've already told you how old I am.

For me, the Vätternrundan accrued a cruel pattern: I'd hang with a fast group for about 30km. Then I'd find myself dropped and burning matches riding solo, as I waited for another fast group to come up from behind and loft me along through the countryside. Riding when you're my age is an exercise in managing dwindling powers wisely, and I was not handling this task well.

By the time I passed Stig, nearly 200km into the race, I was weary, but there were crowds of cheering fans in each little town. At rest stops, volunteers from local sports clubs ladled cool blueberry soup into paper cups and often wore matching T-shirts. The race is a fundraiser for such clubs, and its homely spirit buoyed me along.

I finished in nine hours and 40 minutes – satisfied, but also aware that I had absorbed no wisdom on ageing. I would need to spend the next several days rambling along the shores of Lake Vättern, on my bike and on buses and in a rental car, searching.

* * *

WHEN I FIRST CATCH SIGHT OF HIM, HE'S SHIRTLESS and hunched, feeding a piece of firewood into a screeching 1940s-era bandsaw built before safety catches existed. Protective goggles, work gloves? Nah. Stig Johansson is old-school, and everything in his orbit betrays a staunch recalcitrance.

The crimson sting on his leathery forearms

SPECTATORS IN THE TOWN OF ÖDESHÖG CHEER RIDERS AS THEY PASS. OPPOSITE: ANDERS OLSSON (89) AFTER THE 2024 RACE.

and back? As he sees it, no real man ever wears sunscreen. "Never ever!" The blood-red colour of the simple wooden house where he has lived alone (save for one five-year stretch) since 1971? "It's falu red. Traditional Swedish." And the clutter of junk surrounding his four storage sheds – the rusty buckets, the scraps of wood and concrete? "You never know when you might need it. And there's always someone who wants to borrow something."

When we sit down at an iron table in his yard to talk, I learn that Stig grew up poor, the fourth of nine children. There were so many kids, he says, in a rare moment of vulnerability, "I didn't get a lot of time by myself with my parents."

Stig's father Karl was a furniture maker, but the year Stig was born, his shop – and all the furniture in it – burned to ashes. Karl started work as a carpenter, but when his son was nine, Karl fell about 20 metres off a ladder, incurring a disabling injury that probably had an influence on his early death, which came when Stig was 15. At 16, Stig left school to work at a grocery store. At 17, he transferred to a furniture factory; and today, 62 years later, he is still a janitor there, one day a week.

Stig had a relationship once, with a woman 12 years his junior, but she never found peace residing in his house. "Maybe I'm hard to live with," he says, ruminating on a break-up that occurred nearly 40 years ago. "I offered to buy her a house in town. I offered to renovate and make this house larger, but she was really attached to her parents." When the younger of the couple's two children was barely two weeks old she moved out, and Stig says he did not have much involvement in his kids' upbringing.

His life is very social, though. For the past 40 years Stig has coached teenage handball players, and also served as the volunteer snow groomer at the local cross-country ski area. He may be part hermit, but interactions with others feed his soul, and this is evident even in his Vätternrundan strategy.

Deep in one of Stig's sheds there's a Swedish-brand road bike, a '70s-era Crescent, with drop bars. Inflate the tyres, lube the chain, and it would be a pretty quick ride. But Stig prefers his upright Husqvarna, from the Swedish chainsaw company. "Riding that, you can talk to people," he explains. "They can see you."

When he underscores this observation with his seal laugh, I think back on the moment I saw him, 200km in. All 20 or so riders in my group recognised him at once, and hailed him. He waved back brightly, despite having communed with fans for 15 hours already.

Stig has pushed past hard stuff – poverty, his dad's death, emotional distance from his kids – and found light. Muscle and grit are his survival tools, and I can certainly relate. At times I suffer, well… not clinical depression, but melancholia; and the best treatment I know involves going for a long ride. It's a tactic that works miracles when you're 50 or 60.

But when you're 80? Stig has a Plan B: "People tell me, 'When you can't ride anymore, you can go with me on the back of a tandem!'"

Oh, to be a Swedish celebrity… As I leave Stig's house, I'm quite sure that no one will ever offer *me* a ride on a tandem. I need to seek out a more kindred spirit.

* * *

NILS-GUNNAR STEDT IS A FIGHTER. In 2023, racing the Vätternrundan at age 77, in 28°C heat, he began to feel off-balance about 210km in. "I thought there was something wrong with my inner ear," he says.

Accustomed to pace-lining with his

FANS IN ONE OF THE SMALL TOWNS THAT DOT THE COURSE. OPPOSITE: BIRGITTA BERGLUND (72), THE FIRST WOMAN TO FINISH 50 VÄTTERNRUNDANS.

VETERAN
JAG KÖR MIN 52:A
Starttid: 19:30
VÄTTERNRUNDAN
HALLMAN

NILS-GUNNAR STEDT AT HOME IN LINGHEM, SWEDEN, WITH HIS DECADES OF VÄTTERNRUNDAN MEDALS AND MEMORABILIA.

longtime teammates at 30km/h, he was now alone and weaving all over the road at 19 km/h. Still, when a motorist offered him a ride, he declined, and said he was weaving because his bike had a mechanical tic.

When he stopped for water at 257km, he fell to the ground. A single thought pulsed through his mind: *I must get up.*

He did; and he moved forward, he says, on "autopilot". But after he finished, he didn't go to the doctor – he didn't want anyone to tell him to stop riding.

When I visit Nils, we start chatting in his office, where 50 Vätternrundan medals hang on the wall – along with a 2018 photo of a wizened Nils hunched over a time-trial bike, wearing a pointy helmet, racing in a 70-plus championship in Norway. It's in this shrine to achievement that Nils has written four self-published books on the Vätternrundan, the latest a biography of (I'm quoting the title) *Living Legend* Lars-Åke Åkerman – a man so tough that in 1998, he rode the Vätternrundan soon after he'd crashed his bike into a lump of concrete, shattering his left leg. Åkerman pedalled with one leg that year and finished in 21 hours.

In recent years, though, the 'legend' has softened. In 2019, after completing 55 Vätternrundans, Åkerman's knee problems stopped his riding. And this morning, one of Nils's longtime bike friends has just called to suggest that Nils, too, hang up his cleats. "At a certain point," the friend reasoned, "you need to consider your family."

Nils is dismissive of that advice. "I'm resilient," he tells me. "I have a resting pulse of 34!" He's also developed a new Vätternrundan strategy. After careful consultation with his wife in late 2023, he decided that henceforth, he would soft-pedal the Vätternrundan and make many stops. Amid cool temperatures at the 2024 edition of the race, the strategy worked. Nils finished in 14 hours, feeling fresh.

I ask him: what if he just curbed his Vätternrundan expectations and ended his race in Hjo, a charming resort town 170km in? For a second, my question leaves him dumbstruck. "That won't happen," he says finally, in cool tones. "That would be meaningless."

Nils's stoicism has a deep context. In Swedish, there's a word that dates to the Viking era. Some believe it sums up the Swedish psyche. *Lagom* ostensibly means 'just enough', as in not too hot, not too cold. But in the emotional realm, it describes a cool restraint and a quiet self-assurance so prevalent in Sweden that last year one Swedish town, Luleà, financed a formal *'Säg hej!'* ('Say hi!') campaign, to get its residents to break out of their 'just enough' moulds and actually greet each other.

Stoicism is useful to an endurance athlete gutting his or her way to the finish line. But as a worldview, it's kind of stark; and my chat with Nils left me with an existential question: is life simply a matter of tilting into the wind until the lights go out?

* * *

AT THIS POINT, YOU'VE PROBABLY SURMISED THAT I brought my own stoic machismo to the Vätternrundan. Indeed, when I found myself toiling for 24km or so behind some guy whose seat post bore a sticker reading 'Boys Don't Cry', the phrase tumbled about in my skull like a credo; it was petrol for my engine.

But now I yearned to find a rider who answered life's hard challenges with a bit more humility. So it was an honour to meet the only woman ever to have completed 50 Vätternrundans.

A retired special education teacher who lives in Motala, a stone's throw from the Vätternrundan start line, Birgitta Berglund is 72 years old. Like Nils Stedt, she has a serious racing pedigree. She finished 12th in the 1970 Swedish national road-racing championships; and in 2017, at the age of 65, she rode the Vätternrundan in a solid 11 hours and 31 minutes.

But as we linger on the patio of her pleasant ranch home sipping coffee, Birgitta doesn't focus on her achievements but on the special delights of the race around the lake. She reminisces how, in 1972, she tucked into a lightning-fast pack of a hundred riders, and they so dominated the road that the police sirened onto the scene and broke up the peloton. And she recalls the beauty of the 2021 race, which was held in September thanks to Covid-19, and played out mostly in darkness. "You couldn't tell where you were on the lake," she says. "You couldn't see beyond the road lit up by your headlight. But everything was so calm."

Birgitta has ridden the Vätternrundan three different ways: as a fast racer; as a slowpoke, in the company of her good friend Stig Johansson, the clog man; and (most relevant here) as a moderately slow elder. "During the pandemic, I decided I wasn't supposed to go fast any longer. It's dangerous – you can crash."

Personally, I'd be inclined to regard a slowish race as a dim flicker after a raging fire. But Birgitta speaks of her transition away from speed with neither dismay nor regret. "It wasn't hard to make the decision to slow down," she says. "I get to start early now, and I get to ride through the night."

Her equanimity is rooted in the steadiness of her life and in her family connections. She's ridden the Vätternrundan with both of her daughters, and she's already done a mountain-bike race with her grandson, aged 10. Her partner of 45 years isn't really a cyclist; but he built a special gate for their fence, using her old bicycle.

Besides equanimity, there's also another force at work, Birgitta says, and it involves the Swedish adjective *segare*, which translates as 'enduring' and hints at toughness and a slow persistence. "Women are more *segare* than men," she says. "They live longer; and when you walk around town here, you see that it's the old women taking care of the men, not vice versa."

I'm suddenly aware of how trapped I am in my own male egotism, and of how stubborn and brittle I could become in old age. I wonder: is there a way for old guys to transcend such a fate? And then I think of how at peace I felt sitting on that bench with 89-year-old Anders Olsson, and I make one last appointment.

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> A CERTAIN IMPULSE INSIDE NEARLY ALL OF US YEARNS TO BURN ON, HOPEFUL THAT TIME WILL NEVER LAY ITS GRIM HAND ON OUR SHOULDER.
>
> “

* * *

ON A SUNNY MORNING, I RIDE 24KM OR SO TO meet Anders. We put my bike on his rack and drive to the 50-hectare forest that he maintains with his wife of 64 years.

On the way, he tells me of his 20-hour Vätternrundan journey. At around 209km, he says, "I stopped and turned around to look at some yellow flowers. Near Hjo, I stopped for 10 minutes to appreciate the sunrise."

In 1980, Anders completed the Vätternrundan, then 297km long, in 9h42; but, he says, "The only memory I have of that year is the back tyre of the man in front of me. To chase minutes is a disaster. I am like *Ferdinand*," he says, referencing the classic children's book by Munro Leaf, about a bull who would prefer to smell flowers rather than fight. "I am only interested in sitting by a tree and looking at the flowers."

That's far from the whole story. In his professional life, Anders oversaw production for SKF, a ball-bearing manufacturer. His mind is labyrinthine and logical, and his approach to life is methodical. As we spend two hours tramping his steep forest, he turns the visit into a fine-grained tutorial on forest management; we dwell at length on a complex chart detailing when and how to thin the woods. "It takes 90 years to grow a tree," he says. "You have to be patient." When we sit down in a tiny cabin for lunch, he eats his four gourmet mini-sandwiches one by one, moving from right to left.

You could say that Anders is quintessentially Swedish. In writing about his country in 1984, the eminent Swedish sociologist Hans L. Zetterberg noted: "In Sweden, rationalism has long dominated the climate of opinion... Political debate in Sweden deals primarily with technical questions."

For Anders, I think, rationalism is the firm soil that roots his life, allowing him to flourish and stay vibrant – to have fun, even. He tells me that two of his granddaughters recently appointed themselves his fashion advisors and put his hair in a ponytail. "They told me, 'You look awful!' And now, sometimes I pull the rubber band close to my head, so I look like the comic book character Tintin."

But cycling is the one thing that Anders doesn't plan. When he goes for a ride, he says, "I just make up the route as I go along. And I stop whenever I want."

Eventually, we pick our way downhill to his car. Then we stop at a remote forest intersection. Most people would have offered me a lift back to my hotel; but Anders doesn't bother. We both understand the delight that can come with starting a ride in an unfamiliar place.

As I start pedalling, I watch the wind bend the long grass by the roadside. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a small, riotous voice is going, "Next year, nine hours! The right group, the right training..."

But for now, I just listen to the *whoosh* of my wheels as I roll along through the Swedish countryside. **B**

“WE’VE HAD IT WRONG THE WHOLE TIME”

WHEN ELITE RIDERS ADOPT NEW EQUIPMENT OR TECHNIQUES IN SEARCH OF PERFORMANCE GAINS, THE REST OF US USUALLY FOLLOW. THE TOPIC OF THE MOMENT IS CRANK LENGTH. DOES IT MATTER? OR MORE IMPORTANTLY, DOES IT MATTER TO *YOU?*

BY **DAVID MOSELEY**

SHIMANO
FC-R9200-P
JAPAN VIA
165 TF

◄ Tadej Pogačar's 165mm cranks at last year's Giro d'Italia. Previous spread: Nils Hansen shortened *Bicycling* editor Jon Minster's mountain-bike cranks from 175mm to 160mm. You can see the old threads at the bottom of the crank arm. "Goodbye, pedal strikes," Jon says.

THE OLD SAYING 'WHEN AMERICA SNEEZES, the world catches a cold' has never been more appropriate than today. But if we may be so bold as to direct the metaphor towards a cycling context, it would sound something like 'When Tadej adopts, the cycling world sits up and takes notice'.

This is certainly the case when it comes to crank length, after Tadej Pogačar – who in 2025 has already won the UAE Tour, Strade Bianche and the Tour of Flanders – moved from a 'standard' crank length of 172.5mm to 170mm, and then in 2024 to 165mm. But tongues really started to wag this year when Jonas Vingegaard was spotted using tiny 150mm cranks at the Volta ao Algarve in February. Was he setting a new trend? Was he following Pogačar's lead? Or was it all a double-bluff, to confuse everyone else?

As with any new performance gains linked to equipment changes, the reasons behind those gains are varied and sometimes difficult to define. Just last year, South African sports scientist and Team UAE Emirates Head of Performance Dr Jeroen Swart weighed in on the debate via social media, stating: "[It's] very complex. Going shorter has a number of gains: reduced inertial change per pedal stroke; more open hip angle; better corner clearance; faster time to peak power during acceleration; aero gains. But the trade-off is loss of torque." [*Read our in-depth interview with Swart on p46 – Ed.*]

Brands such as Shimano have entered the fray, offering 160mm, 165mm and 167.5mm crank lengths in their Dura-Ace groupset, and 160mm and 165mm in Ultegra – alongside all the standard longer lengths. In a website statement, the company notes through Dave Lawrence, their North America Road Product Manager: "The idea is that we're trying to help consumers and bike companies build up bikes for a wider range of heights and needs. We've seen no drawbacks in using shorter cranks."

LONG, SHORT, OR JUST GOING ROUND IN CIRCLES?

One man convinced of the merits of shorter cranks is former SA National Road Champ, Olympian and now bike-shop owner and bike-fit guru David George. "The headline for me is that we had the wrong number for all these years," he says. "Crank lengths of 170mm and 175mm are not efficient."

George believes that standard lengths became 'standard' simply because they were first. "The numbers are a hundred years old. They happened without much science. Most competent bike fitters have been talking about the benefits of shorter cranks for about 10 years now."

He adds that in the 'old days', when he was riding for the likes of US Postal Service, bike set-ups for the pros were normally handled by the team mechanics. "They would *never* go out of their way to offer you an option of something that was biodynamically or aerodynamically faster – because it meant they had to do more work!" he says with a laugh. "Now the dam has broken, because high-level athletes have started using shorter cranks. The benefits are so huge, and so numerous.

"Also, teams can no longer operate in old-school ways, where one or two riders are looked after and the rest are cannon fodder. Everyone is getting the best advice on nutrition, training and so on. So, now we have a situation where Tadej is the first – or one of the first – to go to 165mm; and that's made everyone else on the World Tour scratch their heads and look at the benefits."

TREND-SETTER (AND PACE-SETTER) THAT HE IS, Pog isn't the first elite rider to experiment with crank length. In a discussion with *Road.cc*, Phil Burt – who worked as a physio for British Cycling for 12 years and was a consultant physiotherapist for Team Sky – recalled how the aero benefits of shorter cranks were known to Team GB ahead of the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio. Burt and the support team wanted the riders on 165mm cranks at the Games; then former Tour de France winner Bradley Wiggins got wind of the 'upgrade'.

As Burt told *Road.cc*, "Bradley heard that, and said to me, 'I should change.' He was on 177.5mm cranks and he dropped to 170mm in one go, then to 165mm the next day. He dropped his front end 30 millimetres and got a three-and-a-half percent drop in CdA [*drag coefficient*] on the track. That's a man who won the Tour de France, right? Well – you wouldn't say *he* had a bad position, would you?!"

Wiggins broke the Hour Record using 170mm cranks, and claimed a gold medal at Rio in the men's team pursuit using 165mm cranks.

Reece McDonald, a senior coach at Science to Sport, South Africa's globally recognised high-performance specialists, says that the crank debate has only really been discussed ad nauseam in elite circles; but he concedes it's something recreational riders are wising up to.

"Most bikes used to come with a standard of 172.5 or 175mm, so that's what people have been riding," he says. "Elite riders these days have to exploit every gain they can, which is why they're experimenting with crank length. In the pro peloton, racing is getting faster, riders are in aero positions for longer…

"Shorter cranks help to manipulate the rider position so they can hold a more aero position for longer – the more compact pedal stroke allows for a lower torso position. This comes without a decline in power output and without compromising on comfort. Shorter cranks can also make it easier to maintain a higher, smoother cadence, which can enhance endurance and reduce muscle fatigue. That's potentially a huge gain for an elite rider."

At the heart of the shift to shorter cranks is efficiency. Crank length affects the biomechanical range of motion that your legs move through when you pedal. A shorter crank reduces the vertical travel of the knee, hip and ankle, opening up the hip angle. This is especially helpful in aggressive, aerodynamic positions like those used in time trials or in road racing. Less hip compression can lead to smoother power delivery and reduced risk of injury.

But what does that mean for the committed amateur rider? "When you're fitting for a bike, you consider two things," George explains. "You're looking at the maximum extension – or

Nils Hansen

Woodstock Cycleworks

"If you really want to feel what crank length does, get on a 26er with its full gear range and make the cranks really short. It feels like you're pedalling air!"

David George

The Gear Change

"If you're a bigger rider, when you pedal you have to move around the stomach, so your legs splay out. The higher your legs come up, the more you splay, and the less comfortable you are. Shorter cranks change all that."

Realty
Dynamic

Reece McDonald

Science to Sport

"If you're comfortable with your fit and position, rather focus on other areas of improvement before exploring shorter cranks for performance gains."

Images: Jon Minster (previous spread) / Bici di Strada / Supplied

▲ The Crank Saver kit, made by Unior. Nils Hansen at Woodstock Cycleworks uses it to tap new threads into damaged – and shortened – crank arms.

the *optimal* maximum extension – and the minimal angles, and how deep you go into the minimum range. With shorter cranks, you're essentially lowering the foot height at top dead centre; so when you open the hip angle with something else other than putting your saddle up, suddenly your bars become more available: you can get longer and lower when racing."

George adds that cyclists with – ahem – 'larger' stomachs will also benefit from shorter cranks. "If you're a bigger rider, when you pedal you have to move around the stomach, so your legs splay out. The higher your legs come up, the more you splay, and the less comfortable you are. Shorter cranks change all that."

IF YOU CAN'T BUY IT, MAKE IT

In the pre-Covid world, Nils Hansen from Woodstock Cycleworks ordered something called a Crank Saver kit, made by the Slovenian tool company Unior. It's a box of cycling hardware that Hansen says he and only one other bike mechanic in the Western Cape have in their possession, and it's made him the go-to man for crank alterations in the Cape Town area.

"I ordered it in 2018, and it took two years to get here!" he says. "The demand around the world was so high, and very few were coming into the country. I think Louis-Bresler Knipe and I are the only two people with these in the Cape. It means we're the only people who can repair the threads on cranks – and manipulate them…"

Shortening a crank is relatively easy, but it's pointless if you can't tap a new thread. As Hansen explains, you need a drill press to drill the new hole, and then the Crank Saver to create a new thread for your pedal. "It's the rethreading that's the biggest challenge, because the drive-side crank is clockwise and the other side is anticlockwise," he says. "You can't use a hand drill. The thread itself is very bicycle-specific; you can't go and buy this stuff in a hardware store."

Hansen's 'crank era' began with a parent's request to shorten the cranks on an adult-size bike that his child was riding. "This client's kid was using an extra-small Giant with 175mm cranks to do league races. I took 20-year-old 175mm cranks and threaded new pedal holes at 155mm – which made a lot of sense for the kid, because his leg extension was very minimal, and there's a set gear range that juniors are allowed to use for races. He wasn't going to push a 53 ring, in other words. I installed the new threads but I didn't cut the crank, which gave him option of going back to 175mm in the future."

For other clients, Hansen has lopped the ends off mountain-bike cranks, mainly for "clearance issues". With 165mm cranks, for example, you have far fewer pedal strikes than if you're riding 175mm cranks, especially on a dual-suspension bike. In one case, Hansen did a modification for a shorter man with shorter legs, who also had pedal strike issues, so the shorter cranks were beneficial for both practical and biomechanical reasons.

A unique case involved a client who was involved in a microlight crash and almost lost his legs. "He'd had about 20 operations to save them," Hansen recounts. "They managed to save his legs, but his knees were almost locked – his range of motion was so limited that he could only get about a five-degree bend. And the only way to pedal a bicycle with that range is to have very small cranks. In his case, I went to 140mm, on a triple-ring crank on a 26-inch bike. If you *really* want to feel what crank length does, get on a 26er with its full gear range, and make the cranks really short. It feels like you're pedalling air!"

PERSONAL CHOICE

Shorter cranks come with trade-offs.

The most obvious one is less torque. Since torque equals force multiplied by crank length, shortening the crank requires the rider to push harder to generate the same force. For strong, well-trained riders with a smooth pedal stroke, this isn't a deal-breaker. For weekend warriors and newer cyclists, however, it can feel like harder work – especially on climbs.

"Some elite riders have shifted to shorter cranks, for various reasons; but they have the freedom to experiment, and have advanced testing methods to assess if the changes work or not," says McDonald. "Personally, I don't think every recreational rider should ride shorter cranks simply because some professionals do.

"Firstly, there's a cost impact. Secondly, the evidence to show that changing your crank length makes a significant difference is limited to non-existent. We're in the early stages. It's an exciting area to watch, for sure; but more research needs to be done."

"AT THE HEART OF THE SHIFT TO SHORTER CRANKS IS EFFICIENCY."

McDonald continues: "Honestly, there's no right or wrong answer. I use 172.5mm cranks, and they work best for me. But I will say this: if you're a cyclist who suffers from tight hip flexors or hip impingement issues, or if you have short legs, then shorter cranks are worth considering… although the *correct* length is hard to define. If you're comfortable with your fit and position, rather focus on other areas of improvement before exploring this option."

McDonald suggests targeting traditional performance gains: "Do a proper bike fit, train correctly, sleep well, eat better, enjoy riding your bike. Those are the things that make a difference."

FOR HANSEN, IT COMES DOWN TO PERSONAL CHOICE: "Customers get the impression that it makes a big difference for the average Joe – and I do have a feeling that people read too much into what elite riders are doing. I've been riding for 25 years, and I use all types of cranks – 175mm, 172.5mm, 170mm… I did the Cape Town Cycle Tour on a 'mini-bike' with 165mm cranks, so I've ridden them all. I can feel the difference at 165mm, but the rest hardly makes a difference to me – that's coming from an average-height person with regular legs, though!"

The crank debate is now no longer about whether shorter cranks make sense; rather, it's a discussion around *when* riders will get to explore the option. SRAM and Shimano start their crank ranges at 160mm, while Campagnolo's Super Record Wireless starts at 165mm. That said, Hansen and George – both bike-shop owners – caution that you'll struggle to get those shorter lengths in South Africa any time soon.

Like most things in cycling, shorter cranks might simply come down to what makes sense to *you*. George believes that 165mm will start to become the norm at events like the Tour de France, "and I'm willing to bet that SRAM will be producing 155mm cranks by the end of the year…"

Watch this space. **B**

THE EVOLUTION OF A CRANKSET

■ The first Dura-Ace groupset was launched in 1973. It was aimed at professional and keen amateur road cyclists by a then-lesser-known Japanese company, in a market dominated by European brands such as Campagnolo.

The 'Dura' apparently comes from 'duralumin' (the aluminium alloy used to make the first edition) and 'durability'. And the 'ace' part? Well, let's just remember that Shimano is Japanese.

Shimano Dura-Ace has been used by countless pro cycling teams and champions over the years. It's the groupset of choice for current world champ Tadej Pogačar.

1970S
Dura-Ace GA-200
Early Dura-Ace offered indexed shifting and a lightweight design, but struggled for immediate acceptance in European pro racing circles.

1990S
Dura-Ace 7700
In the 1990s, Dura-Ace added STI (Shimano Total Integration) – combining brake and shift levers into one unit. This was a major move in road-bike design and ergonomics.

2000S
Dura-Ace 7800
This series introduced 10-speed drivetrains and widespread use of hollow-tech cranks and external bottom brackets, boosting stiffness and power transfer.

MODERN ERA
Dura-Ace FC-R9200
R9200 is the first Dura-Ace 12-speed groupset. And for the first time, the cranks are offered in lengths of 160mm, 165mm and 167.5mm – along with the standard longer lengths.

Images supplied

HIRU
ORBEA
FOX
MAXXIS

THE TEST ZONE

THE RIGHT RUBBER

The tyres on your bike are literally your only connection to the ground – they're crucial for grip, comfort, speed and safety. Yet so many riders have no clue what to look for when they need to replace their rubber. Here's everything you need to know about width, tread, pressure and compound, so you can make the right decision next time you're in the bike shop.

BY **JON MINSTER**

ROAD

In recent years, tyres for road bikes have grown wider and wider, thanks to the extra clearance afforded by disc-brake frames. And as they've gone wider, they've also gone tubeless. Here are four factors to consider when you're shopping.

1. TYRE WIDTH

Narrow tyres measuring 23-25mm across used to be the norm. Raise your hand if you've ever ridden the Cape Town Cycle Tour on brutally hard 23mm Continentals? That was the traditional racing way – narrow meant lower weight and lower aerodynamic drag, but less comfort.

Times have changed. Tyres are now much wider. New bikes with disc brakes are specced with 28- to 32mm tyres, and preliminary research (see opposite page) shows that you might be able to go even wider. Wider tyres offer more grip, more comfort, and lower rolling resistance, especially on rougher roads.

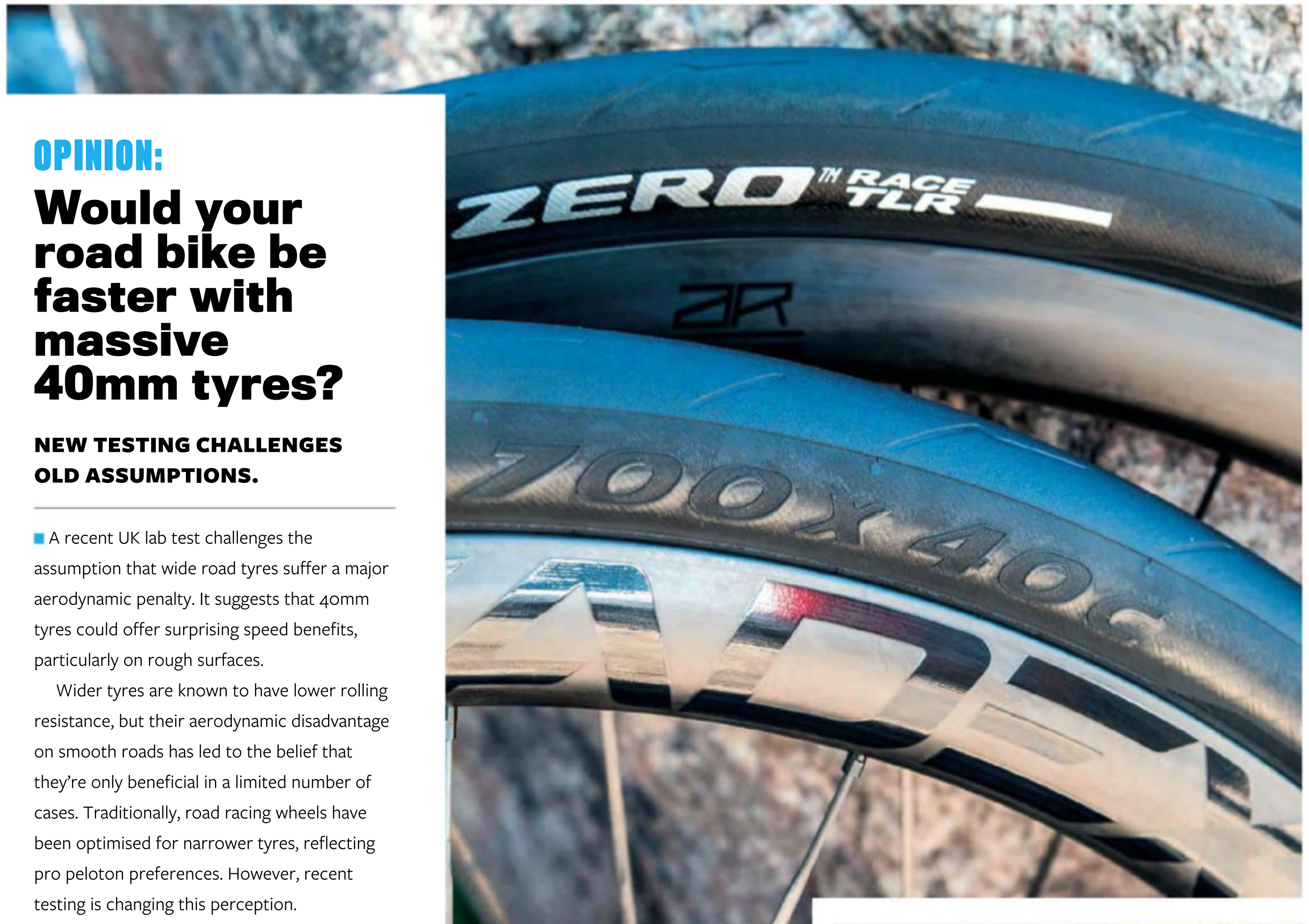
2. TUBELESS VS CLINCHER

Traditionally, unless you were racing on tubular tyres – which had to be glued to a special rim – the standard road tyre was a clincher, designed to be used with an inner tube. Clinchers are easy to install and repair, and for many riders they're still the standard.

It took the industry much longer to embrace tubeless on the road than on mountain bikes. Because of the higher pressure in a road tyre, the sealant inside struggled to seal anything but the tiniest pinprick hole. That has changed. Sealants are better, tyres are better – and because they're wider, you can run lower pressures, meaning the sealant does its job better, too.

Images: Jon Minster (this page), Orbea (previous spread)

Images: Trevor Raab



▲ 40MM SLICKS? DON'T KNOCK THEM UNTIL YOU'VE TRIED THEM!

OPINION:

Would your road bike be faster with massive 40mm tyres?

NEW TESTING CHALLENGES OLD ASSUMPTIONS.

■ A recent UK lab test challenges the assumption that wide road tyres suffer a major aerodynamic penalty. It suggests that 40mm tyres could offer surprising speed benefits, particularly on rough surfaces.

Wider tyres are known to have lower rolling resistance, but their aerodynamic disadvantage on smooth roads has led to the belief that they're only beneficial in a limited number of cases. Traditionally, road racing wheels have been optimised for narrower tyres, reflecting pro peloton preferences. However, recent testing is changing this perception.

I want to give a hearty chapeau to my colleague Josh Croxton at *Cyclingnews* for what I know was a monumental amount of work to pull together a story about his aerodynamic and rolling resistance lab testing of the Pirelli P-Zero Race TLR tyre in all sizes, from 26mm to 40mm.

Croxton tested the Pirelli tyre on two different rims: a (nearly) 30mm (external width) Hunt rim and a 40mm-wide (external) Zipp 303 XPLR rim. All sizes were tested on the Hunt rim, but because of the 303 XPLR's massive 32mm internal width, only the 32, 35, and 40mm tyres were tested on this rim.

Tests compared these tyres on smooth tarmac and on cobbles. As expected, the 40mm tyre on a 40mm rim had slightly more aero drag than the 30mm tyre on a 30mm rim; but the penalty was surprisingly small. However, rolling resistance data showed a dramatic difference: on cobbles, the 40mm tyre had up to 80 watts lower rolling resistance than the narrower option.

When both aero drag and rolling resistance were considered together, the wide system was only slightly slower on smooth tarmac – comparable to the effect of a dirty chain – but significantly faster on rough surfaces. To match a 40km/h rider on 40mm tyres over cobbles, a rider on 30mm tyres would need to generate 76 extra watts.

This challenges the belief that wider tyres only benefit extreme conditions. With real-world road surfaces varying dramatically, the advantages of 40mm tyres – better comfort, grip, and fewer punctures – are becoming more relevant. The weight penalty is also minimal, adding just seconds to a tough climb.

The findings suggest a shift in road-bike design, with future frames, rims and tyres likely to embrace wider profiles. The tipping point is still unknown; but the trend towards wider, faster and more comfortable road tyres is clear.

– Matt Phillips

▲ FOR MOST DAY-TO-DAY RIDING, THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS THAT WIDER ROAD TYRES ARE JUST BETTER.

OPINION: The case against tubeless road tyres

SOMETIMES TUBES ARE PERFECTLY OKAY.

■ Tubeless tyres are essential for off-road cycling; but when it comes to road bikes, inner tubes remain a viable choice. My road set-up is split: my everyday wheels are tubeless, while my lightweight climbing wheels use latex tubes. This set-up helps me avoid one of the biggest downsides of tubeless tyres – maintenance.

Tubeless requires liquid sealant, which lasts around three months with regular use but dries out much faster if the wheels are left sitting. If a tubeless tyre goes flat from sitting too long, cleaning out dried sealant, adding fresh sealant, and possibly replacing the valve can turn into an annoying maintenance task. In contrast, an inner tube set-up can sit for years with minimal attention – just pump it up and go.

While tubeless tyres can roll faster and prevent flats, the performance gains are minimal when compared to latex inner tubes. Some pro teams even choose latex tubes over tubeless. For everyday riding, tubeless does help prevent punctures; but if you don't mind occasionally fixing a flat with a tube, there's little reason to switch. At the end of the day, road tubeless isn't a revolution – it's an option. Depending on the type of riding you do, traditional inner tubes might still make the most sense. ***– Dan Chabanov***

HANG ON – LATEX TUBES?

Latex tubes are lighter and more supple than traditional butyl tubes, which means they roll faster. They're also more stretchy, so they absorb road vibrations better and give you a smoother ride. The downside? They're more porous than butyl, so they lose air faster over time. They're also expensive compared to normal tubes. If you're keen to try them out, here's an option from Vittoria, and a similar type of tube from Tubolito:

• VITTORIA COMPETITION LATEX TUBE

R325 PER TUBE / EVOBIKES.COM

■ These weigh only 45g, so they'll save you weight and improve your ride. It's not just hype – the latex really does soften road chatter and make your tyres feel more supple. Be careful of using them with carbon rims and rim brakes, however, as carbon rims don't dissipate heat as fast as aluminium, and the heat build-up can weaken the latex.

• TUBOLITO ROAD TUBE

R499 PER TUBE / GRAVELANDTOUR.CO.ZA

■ These are the OG lightweight tubes. They're made from a "thermoplastic elastomer", which is more puncture-resistant than butyl and latex, and they don't leak air like latex tubes either. But they're difficult to patch and they're expensive, so weigh that up when you're shopping. Some riders carry a Tubolito as a spare because it's so tiny and light; if you need to use it on a ride, you can always replace it with a normal tube when you get home.

3. PUNCTURE PROTECTION

It's not rocket science: the more durable the tyre casing, the heavier the tyre is and the 'harder' it rides. If you've ridden with a set of Schwalbe Marathon tyres you'll understand – you can ride to Cairo without issue, but it feels like you have hosepipes wrapped around your rims!

On the other end of the spectrum: super-lightweight racing tyres offer wonderful grip and road feel, but they're prone to punctures and can wear out after a single season.

4. TREAD PATTERN

Many race tyres – the Continental GP5000 and Vittoria Corsa, for example – prioritise speed, low rolling resistance and cornering grip. With minimal tread, they're best used on dry roads.

Then you get so-called 'training' tyres, or 'all-season' tyres. These often have a more pronounced tread pattern for better handling in a variety of conditions, and a harder compound and more durable casing for longer wear and puncture resistance.

In South Africa, with our (mostly) warm and dry climate, proper wet-weather tread isn't usually necessary; but it might be worth choosing a set of tyres that have some tread, for better grip in a variety of conditions.

Images: Trevor Raab (repair); supplied (tube)

OPINION: Labelled tyre size is broken

BUYING A TYRE THAT ACTUALLY MEASURES ITS LABELLED SIZE SHOULDN'T BE THIS HARD.

■ There's a big problem with labelled tyre sizing in the cycling industry. Two different tyres, both labelled 28mm, mounted on identical rims and inflated to an identical pressure, can be very different in actual size.

This isn't exactly a new problem. It started in the early 2010s when Steve Hed released the first HED Belgium rims, which had an internal width of 21mm. Up to that point, most road wheels had internal widths of around 19mm, and riders quickly discovered that putting a 23- or 25mm road tyre on a HED Belgium resulted in a slightly-wider-than-advertised tyre.

Fifteen years later, road rims feature widths anywhere from 20 to 25mm, and can be hooked, hookless or feature 'mini-hooks'. If you mount one tyre on all those possible combinations of rim widths, it will measure differently. Throw in the variation in tyre widths from manufacturers, plus variable tyre pressure, and you get a complete mess in which riders have no way of knowing how wide a tyre will be until they've bought it and installed it on their wheels.

Riders are in this mess because tyre manufacturers can't consider every possible rim and tyre pressure combination, making the advertised tyre width mostly theoretical.

Currently, manufacturers use something called a 'design rim' (or a measuring rim) to determine the labelled size for their models. These design rims are derived from the European Tyre and Rim Technical Organisation's (ETRTO) guidelines on how wide a tyre can safely be used on a given-width rim.

For example, the ETRTO chart states that a 32mm tyre can safely be used on a rim with an internal width of 16-25mm. Many tyre manufacturers will pick the middle of that range (around 21mm) as their design rim for 32mm tyres. But before you think this sounds sensible, surprise! Not every brand uses the same design rim for a particular tyre size. This is how we end up with 28mm tyres from different brands that aren't even close to each other in actual size.

Besides being annoying, this creates an unfair burden on riders. Short of spending their hard-earned money on a tyre and mounting it on their rim, there is almost no way to know the actual size of that tyre. And it's an issue that persists across road, gravel, and mountain bike tyres.

So, what's the solution? Short of trying to find someone using the same rim and tyre combination you're trying to use and asking them to measure their tyres, there isn't a solution.

The ball is in the manufacturers' court. They should take the significant first step of stating the inner width of the design rim they use. But I'd prefer if they went one step further, measuring their tyres on a range of modern rim widths and giving us the tyre pressure at which they measure, too. This problem can be fixed by simply giving riders more information! ***– Dan Chabanov***

▲ S-WORKS TURBO RAPIDAIR 28MM ON A 24MM ID HOOKED RIM.

ROAD TYRES: OUR PICK

Vittoria Corsa Pro

FASTEST

VITTORIA CORSA PRO TR / R2 400

■ This is a seriously high-performance racing tyre, used by multiple World Tour teams. The graphene and silica compound offers excellent grip and low rolling resistance, and the cotton casing gives them a soft, supple ride. This is all enhanced in the tubeless version – they're simply dreamy to ride. The negatives? They wear out quickly, and they're not very puncture resistant. Great for race day, in other words, but not the best for high-mileage training.

Cinturato VELO

LONGEST-LASTING

PIRELLI CINTURATO VELO TR / R1 250

■ We've been rolling on a set of these for three seasons now – they're incredible. If you're looking for a durable, puncture-resistant tubeless road tyre, you won't find many others that rival the Cinturato Velo. Although the tread is minimal, the SmartNET Silica compound provides good grip in wet and dry conditions, and the reinforced casing allows you to run lower pressures for more comfort. They might not be the fastest, but they're an investment that pays dividends.

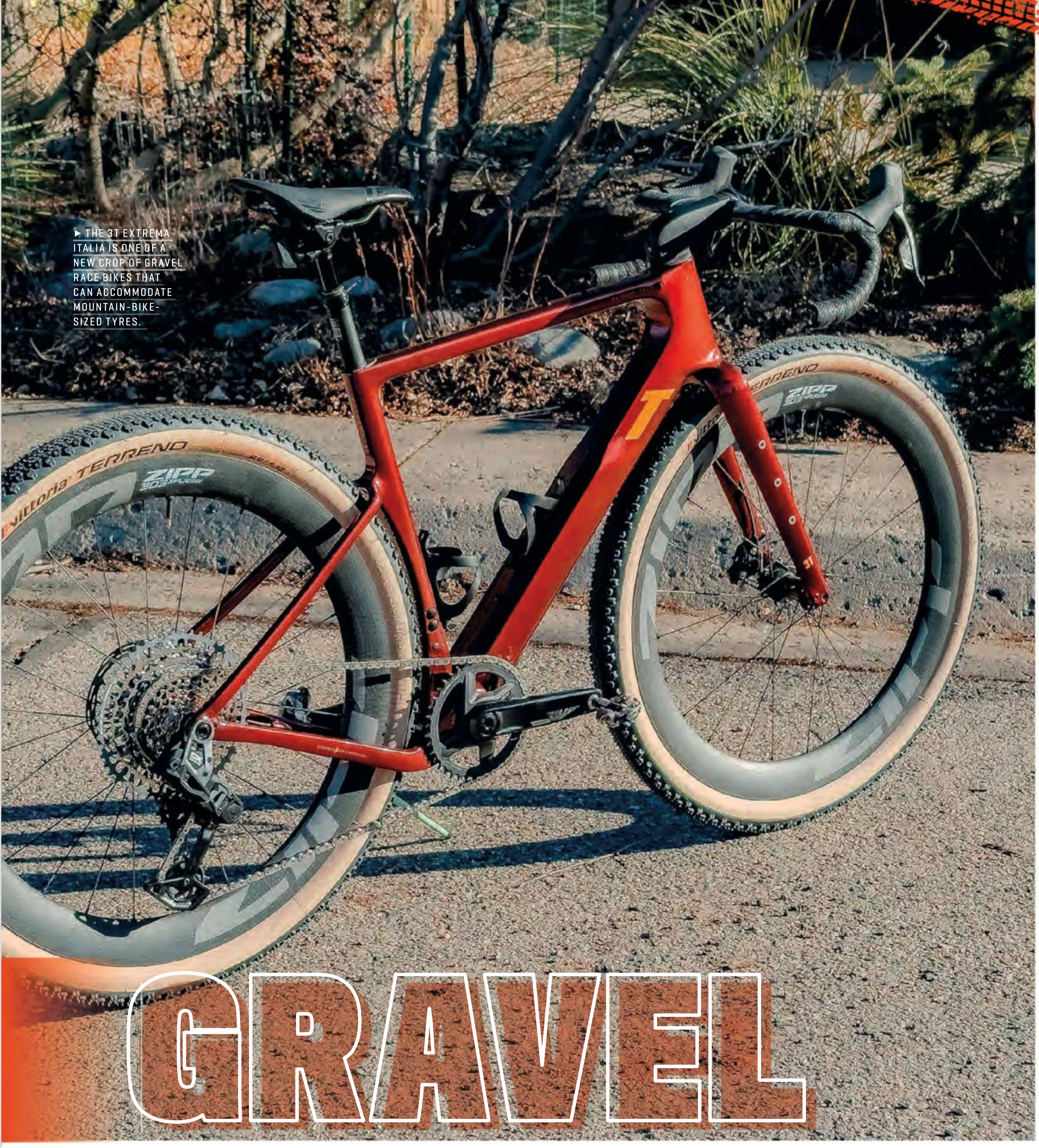
GOODYEAR EAGLE F1

BEST FOR GOING WIDE

GOODYEAR EAGLE F1 R / R1 500

■ Like the Pirellis, these are excellent all-round tyres that balance speed and durability in an affordable package. Locally, popular sizes include 25- and 28mm, but they're available up to 34mm wide and we'd definitely recommend going there if your frame can handle it. At 30mm-plus, the benefits of tubeless go into overdrive – you can run lower pressures, and small punctures seal with ease. No, don't shake your head! Give wider road tyres a try, and you'll never go back.

Images: Trevor Raab (repair) ; Supplied (tyres)



▶ THE 3T EXTREMA ITALIA IS ONE OF A NEW CROP OF GRAVEL RACE BIKES THAT CAN ACCOMMODATE MOUNTAIN-BIKE-SIZED TYRES.

GRAVEL

There's a heated debate happening in the dusty world of gravel racing – is wider better? Gravel tyres come in all shapes and sizes, from knobblies not much wider than road tyres to plump rubber that wouldn't be out of place on a mountain bike. Here are three issues to consider.

Images: Matt Phillips, Trevor Raab

1. DITCH THE TUBES

You might still be able to get away with tubes on your road bike, but you *really* don't want to be riding with them on gravel. The risk of punctures is so much higher when you're dealing with rocks and sand. Plus, because gravel tyres are wider, you can run them at lower pressures, which is far better for tubeless anyway.

Almost all new gravel bikes ship with tubeless-ready wheels. If yours aren't tubeless for some reason, consider upgrading.

2. TYRE WIDTH

Traditionally, any tyre measuring 35mm wide or more, with some tread, would have been considered a 'gravel' tyre; but 35mm is almost in road-riding territory these days.

Yup, the trend in this segment is the same: tyres are getting wider and wider. Last year, for example, Lachlan Morton won Unbound in the US – probably the biggest gravel race in the world – with a 2.1-inch (about 53mm) Vittoria Terreno Dry tyre on the front, and a 44mm Vittoria Mezcal on the back, only because he was limited by the frame clearance of his Cannondale Supersix EVO SE.

As Matt Phillips suggests (see right), if you're shopping for a new gravel bike, it might be worth waiting a while, just to see how far the trend goes.

3. TREAD PATTERN

Gravel tyres are probably the most versatile tyres you can get for a bicycle. They have to be – you need to be able to roll quickly on tar and still get good grip when you head off-road. For this reason, the most popular gravel tyres often have a section of file tread in the middle, with taller blocks on the sides for extra traction through loose corners.

OPINION:

Thinking of buying a gravel bike? Consider waiting.

THE PROS HAVE PROVED THAT WIDER TYRES ARE FASTER, AND THE MARKET IS PLAYING CATCH-UP.

Gravel riding is booming worldwide, but recent trends in competitive gravel racing are reshaping the market. If you're considering a new gravel bike, especially for racing, it may be wise to wait.

Why? It's all about tyre clearance. Not long ago, 40-42mm tyres were the norm; but the latest trend sees riders using XC mountain-bike tyres ranging from 2.1 to 2.4 inches (53-61mm). This shift is rendering many new gravel race bikes outdated, as most lack clearance for such wide tyres.

Professional racers like Payson McElveen and Cole Paton have embraced mountain-bike tyres after realising their performance benefits. I followed up with Paton to ask why he chose to run MTB tyres at the US's Big Sugar as far back as 2023. He told me, "It just made a lot of sense on a course like Big Sugar. Coming from a mountain-bike background, I hated the feeling of getting jarred around, not having any grip, and constantly puncturing on sharp rocks."

Indeed, McElveen and Paton saw the unmistakable advantage of a larger MTB tyre on the rockiest and roughest terrain. But what about the extra weight, rolling resistance, and aero penalty on the smoother and faster sections of the course?

Well, this is the most surprising and potentially revolutionary learning from gravel racers who have tested all sorts of tyres: wider rubber is faster almost everywhere. Paton said, "Once I tested it out, I was blown away. The mountain-bike tyres rolled faster almost everywhere, even on the smooth sections."

Meanwhile, as part of his own testing, McElveen did multiple back-to-back laps on a smooth tar climb, comparing different tyres from his sponsor, Maxxis. He compared his times riding 2.25-inch (57mm) Aspen STs and 45mm Reavers. "The times were basically identical," he said. "Up and down."

Word about the advantages of racing gravel on big tyres spread quickly. In 2024, more and more pros were seen with the biggest tyres they could fit in their frames.

But here's the problem: most popular gravel race bikes are not designed for mountain-bike tyres. Recent models like the Trek Checkmate (45mm) and Cannondale's Super X (48mm rear) already feel a bit outdated. Some brands are hesitant to commit to the wider-is-better trend, fearing it could be short-lived (like the 27.5+ fad in mountain biking), but prototypes with larger tyre clearance are probably in development.

If you want a wide-clearance gravel bike now, options are limited to expensive imports like the upcoming Allied Able, which is expected to allow up to 61mm tyres; the Lauf Seigla with 57mm clearance; and the 3T Extrema Italia, which also clears 57mm-plus. Locally, the Giant Revolt offers 53mm clearance and has proved to be a very fast and versatile bike.

Of course, there are lots of drop-bar mountain bikes with big clearance, which are great for touring and bikepacking, and you could always convert a hard-tail mountain bike frame into a gravel racer with chunky rubber. But if racing is your priority and you want to be at the forefront of the latest trend in gravel, just wait: the market is about to go wild. – ***Matt Phillips***

▲ ADVERTISED CLEARANCE IS OFTEN FAIRLY CONSERVATIVE. OFFICIALLY, THE TREK CHECKMATE (TOP) CLEARS 45MM TYRES AND THE SPECIALIZED CRUX (ABOVE) CLEARS 47MM.

OPINION:

I'm all in on all-road

WHY AN ALL-ROAD BIKE MIGHT REPLACE YOUR ROAD BIKE.

▲ SPECIALIZED CRUX

■ Matt Phillips has (rightly) flagged the trend towards wider tyres in gravel racing, and he's highlighted the lack of big-clearance gravel race bikes currently available; but if you're looking to declutter your garage and simplify your riding experience, ditch your road bike and get a gravel bike that clears 42mm tyres.

The fact is, most of us live in cities where it's far more common to find tar roads, and most of our riding is therefore on tar. That's not to say you shouldn't take the odd dirt detour or head out onto farm roads if time allows. And it's super-fun to enter a gravel race every now and then.

Guess what? An all-road bike can do all of that – and more.

When you try to fit wide tyres into what is essentially a road bike frame, all sorts of things start going weird. The Q-factor – the distance between the cranks – gets wider and more 'mountain-bikey', and there's more chance of toe overlap and heel rub. But a bike rolling on 42mm rubber feels just like a road bike. It's just as fast and nimble, and so much more comfortable and capable.

I'm thinking of bikes like the new Cabal Project X, Trek Checkmate and Specialized Crux – these are bikes that will easily allow you to keep up with the group on tarmac, and you don't have to change wheels or tyres (or own a second bike) if you want to enter a gravel race. Disc brakes make stopping a breeze, and the wider, tubeless tyres make for an exceptionally comfy ride. And yes, fast!

Think about it. Just don't tell your road bike.

– Jon Minster

GRAVEL TYRES: OUR PICK

RACING RUBBER

SPECIALIZED PATHFINDER / R1 100

■ This high-performance gravel tyre is the rubber of choice for many pro gravel racers. The combo of a slick centre and side knobs makes it perfect for fast, mixed-terrain riding. They're lightweight but not Vittoria Corsa-lightweight, because they're also fairly decent at warding off punctures – something that should be high on your priority list for a gravel tyre. They're available in two popular widths: 42mm and 45mm. Go for the wider 45mm option if your frame allows.

SET AND FORGET

MAXXIS RAMBLER / R750

■ Like its mountain-biking cousins, the Maxxis Rambler is the kind of tyre you can rely on. When everyone else is hunched over their bikes on the side of the road fixing punctures, you'll be the guy sailing through. Maxxis' EXO casing is legendary in this regard, and the Rambler gets the full treatment. The trade-off is that it isn't the lightest or fastest tyre; but that's a small price to pay for the excellent reliability. The tread pattern prioritises traction on hardpack dirt, but they're not too bad on loose gravel or in mud.

SO BLING

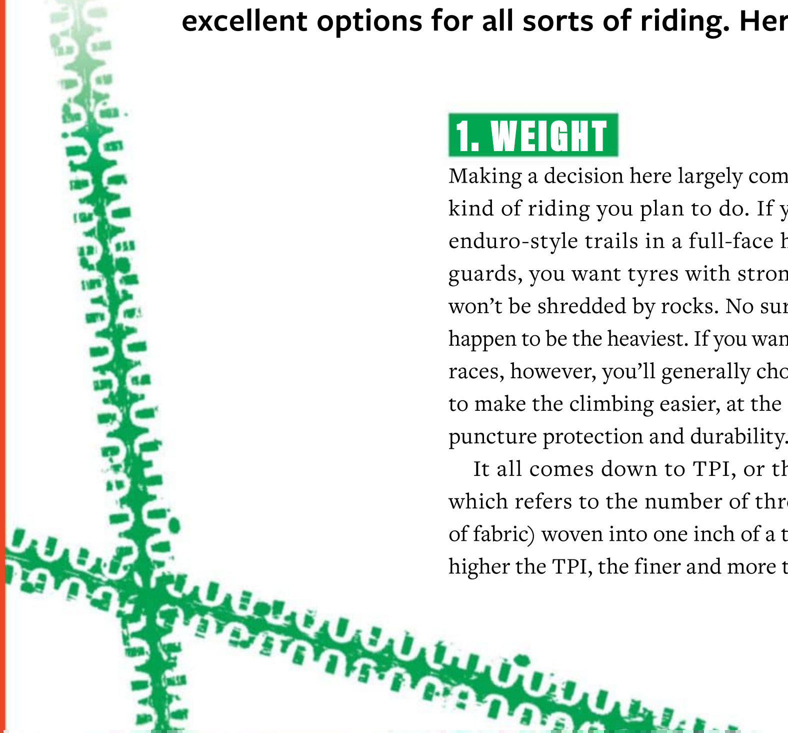
PANARACER GRAVELKING HONEY BUTTER / TBC

■ Panaracer was one of the first brands to recognise the popularity of gravel, and their GravelKing range is legendary. Ask anyone who's been riding gravel for a few years, and they will have owned a set. You can get GravelKings in various tread patterns, from knobbly to almost slick; and you also get them in limited-edition colours each year. For 2025, those colours are 'Honey Butter' (pictured) and 'Cranberry'. Other tyres might offer more puncture protection, but do they match your bar tape?

Photographs supplied (Specialized Crux DSW), Trevor Raab (sealant)

MOUNTAIN

Mountain biking is probably where the tyre industry has experimented the most. This is where the concept of tubeless was born, and it's where size and width have been pushed to the maximum. But the sector seems to have settled into a 2.25- to 2.5-inch sweet spot, with excellent options for all sorts of riding. Here are five important points to consider.



1. WEIGHT

Making a decision here largely comes down to what kind of riding you plan to do. If you want to ride enduro-style trails in a full-face helmet and knee guards, you want tyres with strong sidewalls that won't be shredded by rocks. No surprise, these also happen to be the heaviest. If you want to ride XC-style races, however, you'll generally choose lighter tyres to make the climbing easier, at the expense of some puncture protection and durability.

It all comes down to TPI, or threads per inch, which refers to the number of threads (or strands of fabric) woven into one inch of a tyre's casing. The higher the TPI, the finer and more tightly woven the threads, which generally means that the tyre is lighter and more supple. A lower TPI means the tyre is more durable, but also heavier.

For MTB tyres, the TPI range is usually 60-120 TPI. Confused? Look on the sidewall, and you'll see the TPI number. Knowledge is power. If you can find a lightweight tyre that also offers good puncture protection, that's the Holy Grail of mountain biking.

2. WIDTH

There's less of a width war in mountain biking than in road and gravel at the moment. Mountain biking has already been through the fat-bike and 27.5+ phases, where manufacturers experimented with smaller wheel sizes and wider rubber. It didn't last. The sweet spot seems to be 29-inch wheels and 2.4-inch tyres for analogue bikes, and 2.6-inch for e-bikes, where the weight penalty is offset by the motor.

As with gravel riding, don't max out the clearance of your frame. You want a decent gap between the tyre and the bike, to clear mud and other debris.

3. TREAD PATTERN

MTB tyres for aggressive downhill riding look very different to tyres for XC racing. The latter generally have lower-profile knobs in the centre for less rolling resistance, and sometimes a harder compound there, too. Again, the trade-off is traction and durability.

But you don't have to choose between a beefy knobbly or a lightweight XC tyre – there are plenty of excellent options for all-round trail riding that offer a good balance of grip and rolling speed.

4. PRESSURE

Which tyre pressure you run with tubeless tyres depends on a multitude of factors, including rider weight, the strength of your tyres' sidewalls, and the type of riding you plan to do. Generally, 20psi (1.4 bar) should be perfect for most riding – soft enough to maximise traction, but not so soft that you risk rim damage or a snake-bite puncture.

The extra weight of an e-bike necessitates higher pressure – try 25psi (1.7 bar), and tweak from there.

5. WHAT ABOUT INSERTS?

Tyre inserts are foam or polymer-based 'hoops' that are placed inside tubeless tyres to improve puncture protection and reduce the risk of rim damage. The main benefit is that they allow you to run lower tyre pressures for improved ride comfort and traction.

They're a no-brainer for gravity riding, but they're becoming more popular in XC, too. Vittoria Air-Liner (R1 500 each / *mellowvelo.co.za*) and CushCore XC (R3 400 / *thehangerbikeco.co.za*) are tried-and-tested options.

Everything you need to know about tubeless tyre sealant

TUBELESS SET-UPS ARE BECOMING INCREASINGLY POPULAR FOR ALL FORMS OF CYCLING – FOR GOOD REASON: A TYRE THAT SEALS ITS OWN PUNCTURES IS PRETTY CONVENIENT. SO, IF YOU'RE GOING TO RUN TUBELESS TYRES, YOU'LL DEFINITELY NEED THE KEY INGREDIENT THAT MAKES THAT MAGIC HAPPEN – THE SEALANT INSIDE.

What is tubeless sealant?

■ It's the liquid that goes inside tubeless tyres and automatically plugs punctures as they happen. Most sealant is made from a natural latex base that dries inside a puncture when it's exposed to air. There are particulates suspended in the latex (different brands use different materials), which is what gives the latex something to stick to in order to clog the hole instead of seeping out.

How much sealant do you need?

■ It depends on whether you're setting up your tyres for the first time, or just topping them up. "The imperfections in a new tyre are going to soak up some of the sealant," says cyclocross mechanic Drew Esherick. When you're doing an initial set-up, you should use about double the sealant you'd normally use when you're just topping it up.

For a brand-new gravel or mountain bike tyre, use about 150ml, and use 60ml for a road tyre. These are approximate measurements, so don't worry about getting it exactly right. "There's no such thing as too much," says Esherick. But it's very common to use too little and then wonder why your sealant 'doesn't work', so be generous with it.

How do you actually use the sealant?

■ The least messy way to get sealant into your tyres is through the valve stem. To do this, you'll need a valve-core remover to remove the valve core, and a sealant injector to measure it out of the container and squirt it though the valve, or a pre-measured bottle with an injector tip. If you don't have either of these, you can separate a section of your tyre from the rim and just pour it in.

If you have to opt for the latter method, Esherick suggests pouring the sealant in with the opening at the bottom of the tyre, and then turning the wheel slowly to let the sealant run down inside the part of the tyre that's fully installed. This will allow you to finish installing that last bit of bead without making a mess.

After adding the sealant, replace the valve core and inflate the tyre to its specified pressure quickly, to get the bead to settle in place on the rim. (Do not over-inflate; that can lead to explosions!)

How to maintain tubeless sealant

■ "Bicycle tyres are really thin and porous, which makes sealant evaporate over time, and dry out," Esherick says. That's why it's necessary to top up your sealant about every two to three months, even if you haven't had a lot of punctures.

According to Esherick, you can use as little as 60ml to top up gravel and XC mountain-bike tyres, and a bit less than that for road tyres.

At least once a year, take your tyre completely off the rim, scrape out the dried sealant and start afresh. This preventative maintenance will keep your tyres turning without issues, ride after ride. ***– Riley Missel***

Photograph Trevor Raab

XC TYRES: OUR PICK

RELIABLE & FAST

VITTORIA PEYOTE / R1 095

■ Peyote is a hybrid of Vittoria's Terreno and Mezcal designs, with a flat centre tread and beefier outer blocks. Claimed weight is a bit heavier than some competitors' (730g per tyre), but Vittoria tyres are renowned for durability; and so far, these have proved to be very reliable. The 29x2.4-inch size offers the perfect blend of speed and comfort.

NEW!

SPECIALIZED AIR TRAK FLEX LITE / R990

■ These are Specialized's latest, lightest tyres for XC racing, weighing less than 600g each. They have a 60TPI casing and a dual-compound design, with harder rubber in the middle and grippier rubber on the edges. Tread in the middle is almost non-existent, so these are definitely best for hard, dry trails. They're only available in one size: 2.35-inch.

They're obviously designed for XC, but if your gravel bike can fit them, we can't think of a better tyre for South Africa's gravel roads...

KING COMBO

SCHWALBE RACING RAY / RACING RALPH / R1 299

■ These are the tyres of choice for pro racers like Pauline Ferrand-Prévot and Speed Company's Georg Egger and Lukas Baum. Look carefully and you'll see a red or blue line that runs through the tread – red is Schwalbe's 'Super Race' compound and casing, which is slightly lighter and less durable than the blue 'Super Ground' compound, which has better puncture protection.

Racing Ray and Racing Ralph are very similar; Ralph just has a slightly flattened centre tread befitting a rear tyre, while Ray has raised knobs in the centre for more control up front.

ALL-ROUND TYRES: OUR PICK

ONE TYRE TO RULE THEM ALL

MAXXIS REKON / R790

■ Affordable, durable, fast... There are so many reasons to choose the Rekon. It's a great choice for all-round riding on mixed terrain, with ramped knobs in the centre and chunky knobs on the sides. The 29x2.4-inch size is perfect for most bikes – they plump up nicely on wider rims, often measuring a little wider than advertised.

The Rekon Race version has the same tread pattern, but with lower-profile knobs. It's also a good all-round option but wears out quicker than the classic Rekon, which will roll for many a season before it needs to be replaced.

BEST FOR SINGLETRACK

BONTRAGER MONTROSE RSL XT / R1 300

■ Bontrager recently launched a whole new range of mountain-bike tyres, all named after famous off-road destinations. The Montrose is their do-anything tyre, named after Montrose in Colorado, which has diverse singletrack trails that offer a mix of fast sections and technical challenges. It's a fast-rolling, 29x2.4-inch trail tyre, with a 120TPI construction for supple handling.

That suppleness could open the door to punctures, so they've added a bead-to-bead layer of protection and extra reinforcement around the bead to prevent pinch flats. Topping off the tech is a triple-compound design, with a firm rubber base, a harder centre section for rolling speed, and soft sides for cornering.

HOW TO

SHOOT FROM YOUR POCKET

WHETHER YOU'RE DOING IT FOR STRAVA OR FOR THE 'GRAM, HERE'S HOW TO GET GREAT PHOTOS USING YOUR PHONE WHILE YOU'RE OUT RIDING.

1 **Wakey, wakey.** Photography is almost entirely about light. Composition is important, and so is a whole bunch of other stuff they teach you at art school, but light always wins. Luckily for us cyclists, we're often out on the roads and trails at sunrise and sunset, when the light is best. Be most alert for photo opportunities at these moments. When it's hot and the sun is high, those opportunities tend to dry up.

2 **Safety first!** The light might be amazing, but you also might be riding along a rocky singletrack… It goes without saying that you should only try and take a photo if you can safely remove one hand from the bar.

3 **Easy access.** Make sure you can reach your phone quickly when the golden moment arises. A back pocket always works, as does a cargo pocket on your bibs, or stashed in a handlebar bag. You don't want to have to fiddle with a waterproof packet or anything like that. Your phone needs to be ready to roll.

4 **Know your camera short cut/s.** Most touch-screen phones have a short-cut swipe to open the camera from the lock screen. On an iPhone, for example, you swipe across the screen from right to left. Learn the short cut so you can do it one-handed on the move.

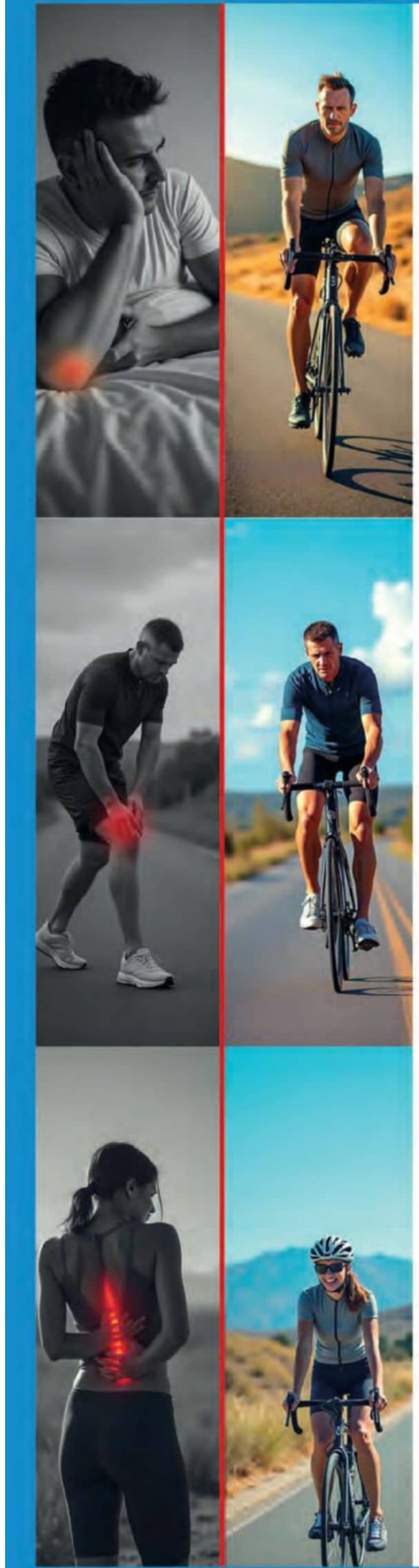
5 **Buttons, baby.** On most phones, you can take a photo using a button instead of tapping the screen. In general, for iPhone and Android, either of the two volume buttons will snap a pic. With your phone in one hand while you're riding, it's far easier to feel for a button than to have to look at the screen and tap the right spot.

6 **Get close.** Robert Capa, a famous war photographer, once said: "If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough." Unless you're deliberately trying to show a tiny rider for scale in a vast landscape, pump your pedals a few times and get as close as you can.

7 **Go wide.** Give your phone's wide-angle mode a try. The wider the field of view, the more expansive a landscape becomes – and if you're close to your subject, this can make for a dramatic effect.

8 **Be creative.** Digital photos are free, so experiment. Try taking a photo after dark or before sunrise – it might be a blurry mess, but you might also get an interesting result. Hang your arm down low and shoot upwards, or point behind you and try capturing the peloton of wheel-suckers behind you. Flip to selfie mode and get your own face in the shot. There are no rules except this one: don't drop your phone! **B**

WORDS AND IMAGE BY JON MINSTER



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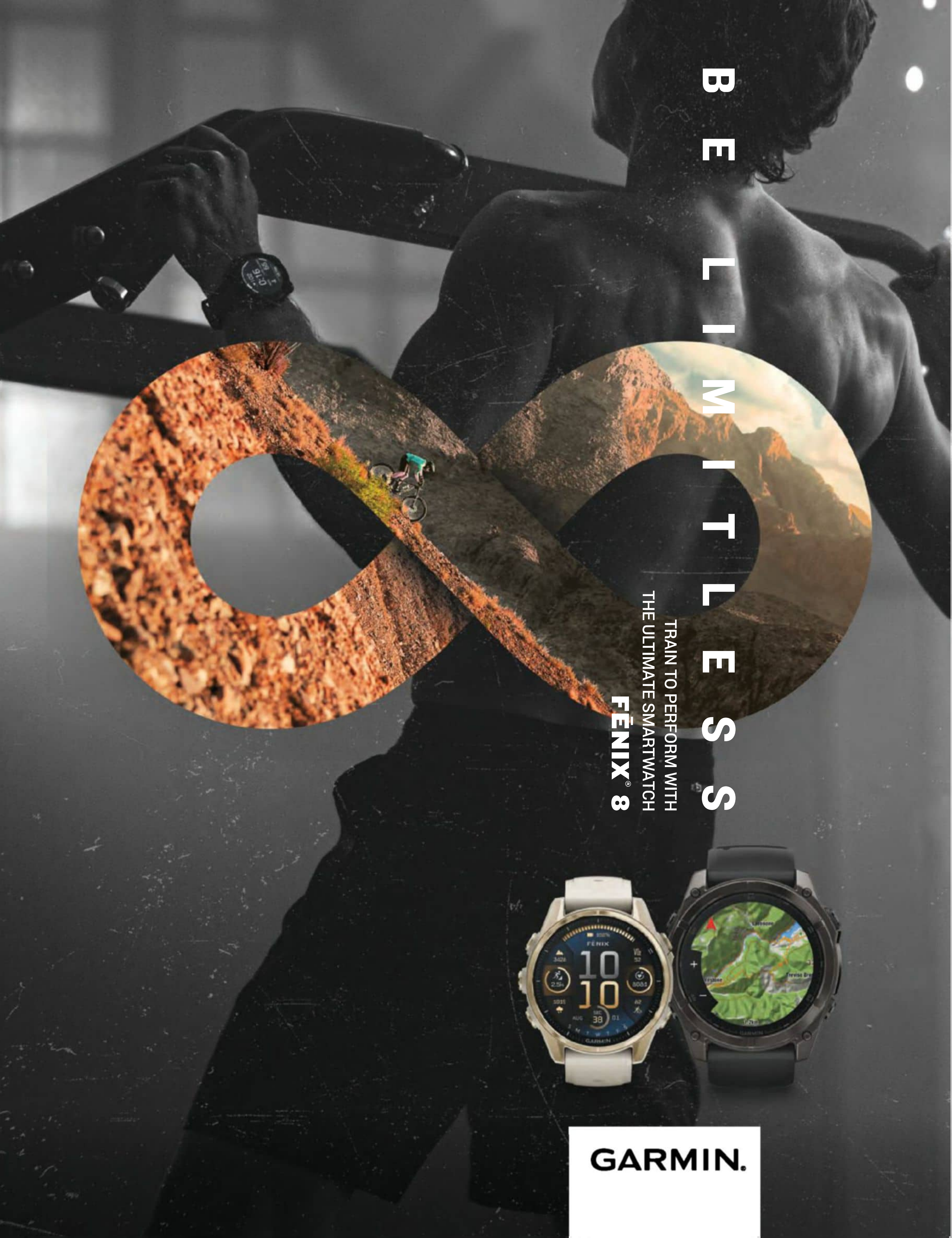
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